

# Gazing at Male Bodies in Superhero Comics: Batman and the Construction and Revision of Masculinity

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# Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of male bodies and the construction of normative masculinity in superhero comics through a panel-by-panel textual analysis of Batman's periodical comics published by DC Comics. As one of the most enduring cultural figures in popular media, Batman embodies a diverse and often contradictory set of ideals about men and manliness, which are consolidated into a coherent cultural image that has remained accessible and resonant for generations of readers. By focusing on the interplay between verbal and visual modalities in comics, this study identifies the artistic and narrative strategies through which masculine ideals are performed, negotiated, and contested.

The research begins with a critical review of existing scholarship on gender and sexuality in superhero narratives, situating this project within debates on male bodies, gender norms, and the superhero as a cultural complex. While previous studies examining bodily presentation tend to assume the position of the 'male gaze' and a focus on female characters, this thesis foregrounds the medium-specific qualities of comics and proposes to apply textual analysis of the gazes on male bodies. By exploring the possibility of homosocial gaze, this research intends to fill the gap in gaze studies which, in the context of heteronormativity, representations of idealised masculinity, are rarely discussed beyond the 'female gaze' and the 'queer gaze'. Developing a set of analytical tools drawn from visual narratology, multimodality studies, and comics grammar, this thesis proposes a form-based analytical framework that integrates art practices, art experience, and comic scholarship to identify and analyse the formation of gaze.

This research represents one of the few comprehensive studies of men and masculinity in superhero culture, with particular attention to mainstream representations that are often overlooked in scholarship. Through detailed case-studies of Batman comics, it explores the mechanisms by which normative masculinity is stabilised and challenged. Themes such as body build, physical capacities, and heroic resilience reveal how hegemonic masculinity is reinforced, while representations of violence, nudity, ageing, death, and queer sexuality expose its contradictions and fragility. By exploring the paradox of dominance in normative masculinity and the simultaneous objectification of the male form, these examples illustrate that the superhero's masculine performance is neither fixed nor uniform but is instead a site of fluid power struggles where meaning is constantly negotiated.

## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to Les Amis de l'ABC with love, in the hope that art and freedom will be everlasting.

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Last but not least, a shout out to all the comic creative teams, writers and artists. It is you who make all the magic real and fantasies alive.



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# Abbreviations

ACMP	Association of Comics Magazine Publishers
CAA	Comic Code Authority
CMAA	Comics Magazine Association of America
DCEU	DC Extended Universe
DKR	<i>The Dark Knight Returns</i>
MCU	Marvel Cinematic Universe
<i>Seduction</i>	<i>Seduction of the Innocent</i>
‘Ten Nights’	‘Ten Nights of the Beast’-part 4
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
<i>Vengeance</i>	<i>Batman: Vengeance of Bane</i>
‘Who He is’	‘Who He is and How He Came to Be’

# Introduction

## Research objective

*'Superheroes are a 'shared vocabulary' that can help us learn, question, and comprehend complicated notions about what it means to be masculine, feminine, heterosexual, homosexual, to be in a relationship, to be in lust, or even to be a shapeshifting alien in love with a sentient robot.'* —  
 Jeffrey A. Brown<sup>1</sup>

As Jeffrey A. Brown commented in *Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes*, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, superhero narratives have become an important component of modern popular culture both in their origin country, the United States, and across the globe. This widespread popularity endows superhero characters with a duality of reflecting and shaping commonly believed standards and ideals. Gender norms are not an exception to such an influence, holding a strong tie with male representations and masculinity. '[M]asculinity is a principal concept in defining and distinguishing an enduring hero', as Mila Bongco observes,<sup>2</sup> illustrating how masculinity performs as one of the core ideologies in mainstream superhero stories.

Tracing back to the origin of the genre, male characters, plus the values they represent, have been an inseparable component in the superhero culture. Superhero comics were born from the influence of pulp fiction, penny dreadfuls, science fiction, adventures, romances and other popular cultural products in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> With in Marked by the debut of Superman, who is the first character widely recognised as a superhero in the sense of modern popular culture, superhero comics emerged from the publication of *Action Comics* Vol 1 #1 in 1938.<sup>4</sup> Batman's first appearance, published one year later in *Detective Comics* Vol 1 #27,

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey A. Brown, *Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Gavaler, *Superhero Comics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), p. 92; Jeffrey K. Johnson, *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), pp.11, 27; Henry Jenkins, "'Just Men in Tights": Rewriting Silver Age Comics in an Era of Multiplicity', in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, ed. by Angela Ndalians (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 16-43.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, 'Superman, Champion of the Oppressed', *DC Comics, Action Comics*, 1.1 (1938).

established the key prototype of male superheroes in comics.<sup>5</sup> ‘Batman’s appearance coincided with the start of the flood of superheroes, indicating that the conventions of the genre were quickly grasped by the writers and artists working in the comic book industry.’<sup>6</sup> The leading impact of these male superheroes not only defines the beginning of the genre, but also continues to occupy a central position in the superhero culture of recent decades. In comparison, the visibility and engagement of both female-led titles and female readers, despite fluctuations, overall occupied a marginalised space since the beginning of the genre and slowly declined until the 1990s, as Tim Hanley’s statistical review of DC Comics and Marvel’s historic letter columns suggests.<sup>7</sup> At least until the new millennium, superhero comics have been frequently deemed and criticised for primarily catering to the viewing pleasure of heterosexual male readers,<sup>8</sup> suggesting a longevity of male superheroes’ wide and dominant influence.

However, the prominent visibility of male protagonists does not necessarily mean superhero comics only host a uniform ideal of male fantasies. Contrary to the widespread assumption that superheroes uniformly embody exaggerated masculine ideals — such as extreme muscularity, physical invincibility, aggression, and dominance — superhero comics have presented a nuanced yet wide spectrum of gender expressions and push the boundaries of norms. Ben Grisanti notices that, in the past decades, changes in readership have significantly influenced the genre’s heavy reliance on masculine ideals and led to changes in characterisation.<sup>9</sup> The prototypical narrative structures and character dynamics between male characters in superhero stories often give rise to a variety of representations of ‘good men.’ For instance, teammate relationships allow space for diverse male character types and often highlight intense same-sex bonds in violent situations, which does not lack similarity

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Finger and Bob Kane, ‘The Bat-Man: “The Case of the Chemical Syndicate”’, *DC Comics*, Detective Comics, 1.27 (1939).

<sup>6</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, pp. 119-200.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Hanley, ‘The Evolution of Female Readership: Letter Columns in Superhero Comics’, in *Gender and the Superhero Narrative*, ed. by Michael Goodrum, Tara Prescott-Johnson, and Philip Smith (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), pp. 221–50.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Hanley, *Not All Supermen: Sexism, Toxic Masculinity, and the Complex History of Superheroes* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Grisanti, ‘Melodrama, Romance, and the Celebrity of Superheroes’, in *Superhero Synergies: Comic Book Characters Go Digital*, ed. by James N. Gilmore and Matthias Stork (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 2014), pp. 238–52  
<<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1648849>> [accessed 17 May 2025], pp. 246-48.

to real-life camaraderie.<sup>10</sup> This hierarchy contributes to their development into distinct embodiments of masculine norms, as both are portrayed positively and affirmed as role models within the narrative.

Moreover, the multiplicity of superhero comics preserves the evolution of masculinity representations. In other words, interpretations of the same character from different historical ages, production teams, publication schemes and even fandom creations co-exist as a part of this character's image and enrich their cultural legacy instead of overtaking one another. As Ben Grisanti observes, the convergence of franchise productions across media in popular culture has transformed narratives from individual, linear storytelling to a loosely coherent complex for both diachronic story arcs and an expendable, spatial worldview.<sup>11</sup> The flexibility of superhero canons — what is seen as an 'official' part of the character's history in a loosely defined common sense of readers and creators — gives the genre the potential to accommodate trial and error stories alongside the more typical ones. Iterations of various styles and settings can fit into the character continuum without severely conflicting with each other: to name a few, Superman underwent a gender-swapping storyline as Claire Kent in *Superboy Vol 1 #78* in as early as 1960, and Batman cross-dressed as a senior woman and a rich lady respectively in *Detective Comics Vol 1 #411* (1971) and *Batman Vol 1 #266* (1975) — not without enjoyment when he stayed in the role in private and addressed his butler and crime-fighting partner Alfred Pennyworth as 'Alfie, honey'.<sup>12</sup> It may be an overdeduction to conclude that these plots and visualisations always reflect deliberate, conscious artistic efforts to portray alternative masculinities. However, they do demonstrate that seemingly queer — or at least diversified — representations of male superheroes have

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<sup>10</sup> Terrence R. Wandtke, and Audrey Anton, 'The Nietzschean Influence in *The Incredibles* and the Sidekick Revolt', in *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), pp. 209–29. For real-life camaraderie and homosociality, see for instance: Kühne Thomas, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler's Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), doi:[10.1017/9781107110106](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107110106).

<sup>11</sup> Grisanti, 'Melodrama, Romance, and the Celebrity of Superheroes', p. 238; also see Russell Backman, 'In Franchise: Narrative Coherence, Alternates, and the Multiverse in X-Men', in *Superhero Synergies: Comic Book Characters Go Digital*, ed. by James N. Gilmore and Matthias Stork (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 2014), pp. 253–75.

<sup>12</sup> Otto Binder and John Sikela, 'Claire Kent, Alias Super-Sister!', *DC Comics, Superboy*, 1.78 (1960); Frank Robbins, Don Heck, and Dick Giordano, 'Into the Den of the Death-Dealers!', *DC Comics, Detective Comics*, 1.411 (1971); Dennis O'Neil, Irv Novick, and Dick Giordano, 'The Curious Case of the Catwoman's Coincidences!', *DC Comics, Batman*, 1.266 (1975), 11.

co-existed throughout the genre's history and continue to exist as a part of their character images.

Over the past two decades, the comic industry has made more deliberate and conscious efforts to expand its readership and include audiences with diverse identities, leading to a nuanced yet meaningful enrichment of mainstream male superhero representation. In 2014, Marvel Comics introduced Kamala Khan as the new Ms. Marvel, marking a groundbreaking moment as one of the first female superheroes from an ethnic and religious minority to lead her own title series as a central character, rather than serving as a derivative counterpart of the male hero of the same name, Captain Marvel.<sup>13</sup> In the following year, DC Comics launched its diversity initiative.<sup>14</sup> These efforts significantly influenced the representation of femininity and queerness in the comic world and subtly revised heterosexual male characters as well.

For iconic figures like Batman, their images, especially in main titles, have remained largely unchanged, continuing to emphasise a normative hypermasculine ideal with, frequently, stereotypical muscular male bodies.<sup>15</sup> However, the narratives constructed around such bodies have become more diversified. *Batman* Vol. 3, launched in 2016 as part of DC Comics' 'Rebirth Initiative', is an ongoing series that generally follows the traditional visual style of superhero comics and classic themes, such as crime-fighting and adventures. What distinguishes this volume from previous series is that it strongly focuses on Batman's humanity, vulnerability, and emotional depth, moving beyond the image of a stoic, invincible hero to explore his inner struggles and psychological complexities. Story arcs such as 'Fear State' (#112–117) tackle the theme of fear and trauma, and issues #44–50 present the bittersweet and ultimately unfulfilled wedding between Batman and Catwoman, highlighting his emotional uncertainty and his ongoing battle with loneliness. These moments give readers a more intimate and relatable look at Batman, showcasing not only

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<sup>13</sup> Goodrum, and others, *Gender and the Superhero Narrative*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Official Press Release, 'Dc Entertainment Announces New Books, New Creators, Broader Focus for the Dc Universe', *DC*, 6 February 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Louie Dean Valencia-García, 'Truth, Justice, and the American Way in Franco's Spain', in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. by Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), pp. 45–62. For the development of mainstream iterations of Superheroes, see, for example, Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History: The Life and Times of the Man of Steel* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998); Edward Gross and Robert Greenberger, *Superman: The Definitive History*, Insight Editions (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2024).

his strength, but also his emotional fragility. These new elements and character dynamics further enrich the norms of superheroes, illustrating that ‘masculinity’ of superheroes is hardly a singular word, but leans more into coexisting types, directions, and hierarchies within separated yet vaguely defined communities or backgrounds — ‘masculinities’.

Within this diverse landscape, Batman occupies a particularly compelling position. Often viewed as a hypermasculine figure, he epitomises many traditional ideals associated with dominant masculinity: in addition to his well-known traits, such as muscularity, physical prowess, intellectual strength, and wealth, Batman also enjoys an extraordinary social status among peer heroes that recognises his superiority and excess. He has initiated several international social justice restoration programs, such as ‘Batman Incorporated’, and serves as a key decision-maker in multiple superhero alliances, including the Justice League. Beyond his role as a hero, he acts as a patriarchal leader and protector of an extended network of allies and protégés, commonly referred to as the Bat-Family. Yet, unlike many of his superpowered counterparts, Batman’s appeal is also grounded in his mortality and lack of supernatural abilities, which complicates his masculine identity. Compared to the upbeat positivity and plain strength of his superpowered teammates, such as Superman and Captain Marvel, Batman’s character image also frequently presents characteristics that are not commonly associated with normative masculinity: stealth, cunningness, gothic darkness, or sometimes a campy, silly-looking man dressed as a flying rodent. In a large number of iterations, Batman’s body type tends to be less muscular to imply agility and flexibility.<sup>16</sup> In ‘How to Draw Batman’, a drawing tutorial included in *Limited Collector’s Edition #37* (1975) released by DC Comics, Bruce Wayne’s body is described as ‘the muscular (but not muscle-bound) build’,<sup>17</sup> which differentiates him from the more exaggerated muscles of superpowered heroes. Batman’s limitation of being a non-powered human softens the extremity of his traits, opening interpretive space to question, reflect, and challenge his representation of masculinity.

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<sup>16</sup> This is, of course, in a fictional superhero standard, as in the real world, Batman’s 6ft 2in/210 lbs physique (according to *The DC Comics Encyclopedia* (2004) and (2021)) is in no way ‘slim’. In comparison, the more broad-shouldered, sturdy-built Superman stands at 6ft 3in/235 lbs. I will not go further into the direction of sci-fi science to discuss the plausibility of such fictional data. Nonetheless, even in quantitative measurements, the main universe Batman usually does not fall into the category of the biggest men among DC’s combat superheroes; Phil Jimenez, *The DC Comics Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Characters of the DC Universe* (London: DK Pub., 2004), p. 32; Matthew K. Manning and others, *The DC Comics Encyclopedia New Edition* (London: DK, 2021), pp. 28, 300.

<sup>17</sup> Bill Finger and others, ‘How to Draw Batman’, *DC Comics, Limited Collectors’ Edition*, 1.37 (1975), 57.

With his compelling contradiction between idealised normativity and nonconformity, Batman has long been a subject of gender debates that have profoundly influenced comic book culture and beyond, and even after 86 years since his first appearance, he remains central to gender studies within the superhero genre. The cultural legacy of Batman, along with other mainstream superheroes, builds upon countless panels about repetitions of their bodily images and physicality that draw attention to exaggerated and idealised images of men. The excessive depictions of men, which are arguably the most visible objects in superhero comics, inspire my research interest in analysing the significance of male bodies, what they represent, what interests they serve, and what potential influence they have.

Building on this inspiration, this dissertation aims to examine periodical Batman comics to explore how visual and narrative strategies engage the gaze of the viewer on male bodies, evoke pleasurable readings and contribute to contemporary constructions, deconstruction and reformation of masculinity. To achieve this aim, the research objectives include four key steps: identifying gaze-inducing strategies, exploring what kind of pleasure the gaze induces, analysing the notions and power dynamics about gender roles implied by the viewing pleasure, and evaluating the impact on the connotation and dominance of masculinity. This research fills in the gap of current scholarship that normative masculinity, especially how it is reflected in the portrayal of mainstream superheroes, tends to be less researched than the presentation of superheroines, queer superheroes and characters with other minority identities. By shifting the focus from the marginalised to the culturally dominant superhero figures, this research puts Batman as cultural product under an analytical microscope, examining how Batman, as a widely recognised masculine role-model, performs more nuanced and multi-layered gender norms than the general impression of his aggressive, controlling hypermasculinity.

## Research Questions

To explore the relevance of spectating and masculine identities in superhero comics, the following research is preoccupied with a focus on exploring the relevance between the visual and narrative construction of male superhero bodies in comics and broader cultural understandings of masculinities. Based on this research focus, I propose three research questions:

1. How does the excessive attention to the presentation, decoration, and concealment of male bodies in superhero narratives engage readers' gaze through multimodal devices?
2. Do such gazes provide a narcissistic pleasure by fostering self-identification with a fictional ego, or do they fulfil the desires of voyeurism by alienating and objectifying the gazed body? Do the projecting/alienating spectacles of superheroes contain sexualised connotations?
3. What power structure is formed by gazing or the lack thereof, and how does the viewing experience contribute to shaping the concept of masculinity?

## Thesis Structure

This section outlines the structure of the dissertation and explains how each chapter contributes to addressing the research questions. Overall, this research approaches the topic of masculinity and superhero bodies based on gaze analysis in textual presentations, discussing characters' performance and embodiment of gender norms. The main body of this dissertation contains five chapters:

Chapter One reviews the current research on the presentation of gender features and norms in superhero comics, pointing to the gap that the visibility of male bodies is underexplored. The literature review concludes that current research on superhero masculinity implies a common anxiety of unconventional masculinity that engages with queerness, camp and other destabilising features to masculine norms; in contrast, heterosexual male characters performing normative masculinity are less frequently researched as spectated objects despite their prominent representations in the genre.

Chapter Two introduces the methodology and theoretical framework that builds on the quest to explore the significance of male bodily images. It explains the research design that employs gaze studies as the framework for analysing the characterisation that a superhero narrative intends to convey. After that, it further elaborates on the theoretical foundation of how the gaze transfers an image into a source of pleasurable looking with comic art theories and visual languages. The mechanism of the gaze's influence on the formation of an understanding links the elements in sub-research questions, namely bodily presentations,

identification/alienation and sexualisation, to the overall target of concluding interpretations of masculinity. This chapter also justifies the choice of Batman and his featured issues as case-studies and explains the scope and limitations of viewing modern superhero comics as an ahistorical cultural complex.

Chapter Three, as the first group of case-studies, discusses the establishment of the notion of normalised standards of men in Batman stories, which forms a baseline for further discussions on comics' challenges and influence on masculinity in the following chapters. This chapter concludes several basic aspects of superheroes' representation of normative masculinity, including appearance, capability, narcissistic self-affirmation, and dominance. It also illustrates the control of viewing as a privilege that empowers the male protagonist and reinforces his position as an idealised incarnation of masculinity.

Chapter Four is centred on the case-studies related to the theme of nudity and violence, pointing out that the legitimacy of a superhero's performance of gender norms is contextually dependent and highly influenced by metaphors of invasion and control rather than plots. It draws attention to the visual and narrative elements that can potentially destabilise the equation of superiority and masculinity — although, depending on the power dynamics between the character and the spectator, the subversive potential of these elements may not be fully realised.

Chapter Five further explores the topic of reforming the norms and standards of men's images in superhero narratives. The case-studies in this chapter are based on two topics where the representations of masculinity are comparatively fluid and diversified: ageing and death as the destruction of the idealised male bodies, and queerness in interpersonal relationships. This chapter analyses the collision between visual presentations of normative masculinity and narrative deconstructions of their validity, or vice versa, marginalised masculinity and narrative affirmation. It is argued that experimental explorations about male bodies' relevance in fantasy, homosocial and philosophical discussions enrich superhero narratives, giving this genre a reformative strength in the deconstruction and revision of gender norms.

Finally, the conclusion chapter addresses again the double role of superheroes' bodily images. On the one hand, male superheroes are crystallised representations of normative masculinity, reflecting the dominant ideals of masculine images upheld by the social

contexts in which they remain popular and relevant; on the other hand, as transcendental figures, they also possess the potential to actively reshape the meaning of masculinity, pushing it in more exploratory and progressive directions. This fluidity, arguably, is precisely what defines the ‘super’ in superhero masculinity: They embody shared values among ordinary people, yet they are also exceptional — whether by being non-conforming and marginalised, or by excelling in their conformity to traditional ideals.

## Definitions

Before moving on to the research, it is necessary to draw a baseline on certain core terms, especially when the nature of these fundamental concepts is still under heated debate in critical studies. In this section, I will first introduce the concept of comics and superheroes. Then, I will clarify several terms from gender studies terminology that are frequently drawn on in later discussions. Finally, I will specify the meaning of gaze, introducing a prerequisite base of the theoretical framework of the whole dissertation. Specifically, the gaze is seen as a multimodal mechanism that establishes a power structure with literal and metaphorical viewing pleasure, which means that the gaze studies in this thesis move beyond the traditional categorisation of male/female/queer gaze, to emphasise the libidinal drive in viewing without limiting the pleasure to a specific gender or sexuality norm.

## Comics

Comics are not only a phenomenon, but also a language. For most of the common definitions of comics, sequentiality and visuality are two core aspects of the definition. Scott McCloud defines comics in *Understanding Comics* as ‘plural in form, used with a singular verb, juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer’.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the definitions made by Will Eisner, Greg Hayman, Henry John Pratt and David Carrier all emphasise the sequential — mostly narrative — nature in the assembly of pictures in comics.<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, Aaron

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<sup>18</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*, The Will Eisner Library (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2008), pp. 7-24, 122-146; David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2000), p.4; Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt, ‘What Are Comics?’, in *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, ed. by David Goldblatt and Lee Brown (Hoboken: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), pp. 419–24.

Meskin examined historical and avant-garde comics to argue against the validity and necessity of enlisting narrative sequence as a qualitative standard of comics, which especially targets the effectiveness of Hayman and Pratt's definition.<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that DC Comics does have collaborative projects with international artists to employ diversified visual styles and presentations, such as *Bat-Manga* (1966-67, reprinted in 2014-15), and *Batman: The World* (2021).<sup>21</sup> However, since this dissertation research focuses on mainstream popular comics in the USA, the selected comics as primary sources hardly challenge the definition of comics, both in terms of the arrangement of text and images and the juxtaposed organisation of panels.

On the other hand, textual analysis of comics inevitably needs to address its unique mechanism as a bearer of meaning rather than seeing it merely as a transparent vehicle. Although Meskin expressed reluctance in categorising comics, in 'Defining Comics?', he specifically emphasised the importance of examining comics as a unique medium.<sup>22</sup> Linguistic research on comics responds to this appraisal with a unified attention on narratives and modalities. In *The System of Comics*, Groensteen views comics as 'a language, [...] an original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning' that is primarily image-based, which also coincides with Neil Cohn's studies of the visual language as a narratological structure of comics.<sup>23</sup> Combining the focuses of visual-verbal narratives and language, 'comics' in this dissertation are approached as a language in narrative sequential arts of images with or without texts.

## Superhero

In regard to the other keyword of the research, the concept of 'superhero' in the sense of modern popular culture is a surprisingly debatable issue. Although it appears that a group of fictional characters or icons are commonly accepted to form a vaguely defined prototype image of superheroes, the boundary of such a definition is hard to clarify in a deductive

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<sup>20</sup> Aaron Meskin, 'Defining Comics?', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65.4 (2007), pp. 369–79.

<sup>21</sup> Jiro Kuwata, *Batman: The Jiro Kuwata Batmanga*, Bat-Manga, 2nd edn (New York: DC Comics, 2014), i–iii; Brian Azzarello and others, *Batman: The World*, 1st edn (New York: DC Comics, 2021), i.

<sup>22</sup> Meskin, 'Defining Comics?', pp. 77-78.

<sup>23</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), pp. 1-2; Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. (London: A&C Black, 2013).

manner, especially when characters created by different publishing houses in different historical contexts dramatically vary in abilities, presentations, core conflicts and other traits. As Wandtke and Anton notices, defining superheroes solely based on metahuman abilities, i.e. 'super', would rule out Batman as a superhero, while if using Batman as a reference and addressing masks as a must-have, Superman would no longer be a superhero since his identity concealing attires are only applied in his civilian identity instead of the hero one.<sup>24</sup> In other words, key identifiers of a certain type of character could be inapplicable to others, even if they are all very likely to be undisputable 'super' and 'heroes'. Thus, interpreting the term's general impressions can raise major contradictions between the academic scope of the definition and what is commonly considered by the public as a superhero.

In the current research on superheroes, the definition of a superhero character is widely derived from a synthesis of the events and characteristics of established superheroes. As one of the most representative examples of such a definition, Peter Coogan's description of a superhero involves their missions, abilities, appearance, identities, and distinguishable features that isolate them from fictional characters across a variety of genres, such as detective stories or science fiction.<sup>25</sup> However, a convention-based definition that provides a closed-end list of features often ends in controversies about whether a specific character is excluded from such generalisation. As Chris Gavaler points out, the dilemma of defining a superhero by conventions lies in the contradiction between the definitive barriers of the listed features and the chaos and vagueness within the culture of comic productions and receptions.<sup>26</sup> Building on Coogan's effort in specification, Jess Nevins proposes to see superheroes as a fuzzy cluster of character images and provides an open-ended list, identifying features that are generally included in superhero-stylised characterisation yet are only partially applicable for individual characters.<sup>27</sup> For the purpose of discussion, a working definition of superhero in this dissertation follows Nevins' list, covering the fictional characters who 1) partially fit the characteristics on the list; 2) are commonly accepted by popular culture as a superhero. The list is as follows:

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<sup>24</sup> Wandtke and Anton, 'The Nietzschean Influence', pp. 222-23.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Chris Gavaler, *On the Origin of Superheroes: From the Big Bang to Action Comics No. 1* (Iowa city: University of Iowa Press, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Jess Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger: The 4,000-Year History of the Superhero* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017), pp. 6-7.

1. An unusual origin story
2. Superpower(s)
3. Extraordinary skills and abilities
4. Extraordinary technology
5. A distinctive weapon
6. A distinctive appearance
7. A code name
8. A dual identity
9. A heroic mission
10. Extraordinary opponents
11. World views: law enforcement, absolute morals, wide vigilantism, etc.
12. Mortality
13. No-kill rules<sup>28</sup>

Also, it is interesting to note that ‘superhero’, as a narrowly defined label, is jointly claimed by DC Comics and Marvel Comics as an exclusive trademark in the United States.<sup>29</sup> Although superheroes in this sense are more concerned with copyright law rather than cultural studies, this definition nonetheless illustrates that mainstream superheroes indeed consist of a unique type of characters that are independent from other popular genres. For the cases in this dissertation, Batman in DC Comics’ officially released comic books fits Nevins’ definition.

The differentiation of ‘superhero’ and ‘hero’ is important. Superheroes are relevant to the character type of heroes, but these two expressions are not interchangeable terms. Both superheroes and heroes provide exemplification of idealised individuals who exceed mundanity: a story that reflects ideological values and provides guidance for conforming to standards of virtue or achieving redemption.<sup>30</sup> What marks the difference between a hero and a ‘super’ hero is how they achieve such transcendence. Otto Rank’s *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, Baron Raglan’s *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*, and

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<sup>28</sup> Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>29</sup> Jason Bainbridge, ‘Beyond the Law: What Is so “Super” About Superheroes and Supervillains?’, *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique*, 30.3 (2017), pp. 367–88, doi:[10.1007/s11196-017-9514-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-017-9514-0).

<sup>30</sup> Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (A&C Black, 2009), p. 15.

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* define heroes by synthesising traditional prototypes of heroic figures, which originated in Greek mythologies and continue to thrive in modern culture.<sup>31</sup> In these studies, conclusive descriptions are drawn from commonly shared features in their story arcs, such as distinguished yet mortal origins, adventures and justifications of righteousness.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, Campbell notices that heroes make efforts to transcend a 'threshold' of dailiness for the opportunities of achieving extraordinary accomplishment, which resonates with Mike Alsford's observation that a hero narrative is established on empowerment, on chosen individuals' journey of gaining 'salvific powers unavailable to ordinary humanity.'<sup>33</sup> In other words, heroes are the characters who hold the potential of transforming ordinariness and have to strive to realise such potential.

Accompanying this heroic character type, figures resembling superheroes, described by Jess Nevins as 'protosuperheroes' to denote pre-Superman examples,<sup>34</sup> have also appeared in legends, myths, and literature for centuries. Nevins traces examples from literature spanning 2100 BCE to 1500 CE, identifying heroic figures such as the 'Costumed Avenger' and the 'Übermensch' as foundational to the development of modern superheroes.<sup>35</sup> For instance, Enkidu in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, whose origin emphasises innate, extraordinary selflessness, exemplifies these early archetypes — even argued by Nevins as the first protosuperhero.<sup>36</sup> Compared to their historical predecessors, modern superheroes extend and intensify the features of excess and heroism, internalising extraordinariness as a primary setting in their stories. A comic book superhero is, by default, exceptional and does not need to struggle against the control of mundanity. Aditya Misra's comparison between a hero and a superhero can explain their difference clearly: a hero narrative transforms mundane, anonymous existence into grandeur, addressing the significance of achieving the extraordinary by a flawed, supposedly ordinary hero.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, superheroes, being more

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<sup>31</sup> Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Exploration of Myth*, trans. by E. James Lieberman and Gregory C. Richter (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2004); FitzRoy Richard Somerset Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (New York: Courier Corporation, 2003); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato: New World Library, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp. 71-82; also see Mike Alsford, *Heroes and Villains* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-19.

<sup>37</sup> Aditya Misra, *Theorizing the Superhero: Performativity and Politics* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), doi:[10.1007/978-3-031-62933-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62933-4), pp. 3-9.

than a mere magnified image of the literary hero traditions, transcend the core struggle about ordinariness and directly address the emotional need for rectifying flaws and inabilities with a superior, more perfected version of reality — ‘a product of creative human desire — an expansion of the perception to the virtual — what is yet to be’.<sup>38</sup> This ideology overlaps with Jason Bainbridge’s definition of superheroes by their legal transcendence and pursuit of substantial justice from a perspective of legal research.<sup>39</sup> Compared to the necessity of justification and transformation in hero narratives, the self-evident superiority of superheroes reflects a desire for perfection that is not a quest but an ideal.

Superheroes are also referred to by their social roles and perceptions in the diegetic settings, for example, their missions of crime-fighting and their defence of justice. *Encyclopedia of Heroism Studies* lists synonyms for the term ‘superhero’ as ‘costumed crime-fighters’, ‘masked avengers’, and ‘mystery-men’.<sup>40</sup> ‘Vigilante’ is another common term used to describe comic book superheroes. Vigilantism refers to an individual’s belief that it is justified to seek order-breaking measures to restore established social orders,<sup>41</sup> which makes it a political label rather than an action-defined or performed identity. Batman, as one of the earliest and arguably most typical superheroes, fits almost all of these criteria, such as ‘masked’, ‘costumed’, ‘against crime’, ‘mysterious’ and ‘vigilantist’. Still, it needs to be pointed out that these paraphrases commonly seen in academic writings intend more to reflect an important component of one or several superheroes’ character image, rather than to restrain the definition of superheroes to a specific visual or motivational element.

Finally, superhero comics, of course, contain superheroic characters of various gender identities as a genre. However, as the entire research is primarily centred on male bodily images, for convenience and concision, the discussions on ‘superhero’ as characters in this thesis only apply to male-identified comic book characters and ‘superheroine’ for female

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<sup>38</sup> Misra, *Theorizing the Superhero*, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Bainbridge, ‘Beyond the Law’, pp. 367–88.

<sup>40</sup> *Encyclopedia of Heroism Studies*, ed. by George R. Goethals, James K. Beggan, and Scott T. Allison (Cham: Springer Nature, 2024), p. 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Mike S. Dubose, ‘Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40.6 (2007), pp. 915–35, doi:[10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00478.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00478.x).

superheroic characters without further (and apparently clumsy and repetitive) specification.

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## Sex, Gender and Sexuality

In research on gender issues, ‘sex’, ‘gender’, and ‘sexuality’ are three core concepts that need to be clarified for the purpose of this thesis first. In Edwin S. Segal’s introduction of the constructivist explanation of sex and gender in ‘Cultural Constructions of Gender’, it is concluded that the structure of defining gender identities in modern Western societies, represented by the United States, is described as a ‘sex-gender-sexuality’ system that prioritises a binary division of men and women.<sup>43</sup> In this system, sex, gender and sexualities are respectively perceived by conventional beliefs of sex-relevant biological differences, social construction derived from such differences, and gendered norms — especially sexual preferences — which consist of standards of behaviours of a gender. In *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, these three terms are specified as such:

1. Sex: the typical differences between females and males which are most likely due to biological differences.
2. Gender: two or more classes of persons who are believed to be different from each other; [A] culturally based complex of norms, values, and behaviours that a particular culture assigns to one biological sex or another.
3. Sexuality: the ways in which individuals structure their sexual and gender performances, and the partners toward whom they direct their behaviour and emotional attachments.<sup>44</sup>

For this dissertation, all the research materials are selected from modern comics produced in the USA. Thus, the sex-gender-sexuality system is in general sufficient to describe the social

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<sup>42</sup> For more terminological exploration about the applicability of ‘female superheroes’ and ‘superheroines’, see ‘What Is a Female Superhero’ by Jennifer Stuller and ‘Wonder Woman: Superheroine, Not Superhero’ by Peter Coogan; Jennifer Stuller, ‘What Is a Female Superhero’, in *What Is a Superhero?*, ed. by Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter MacFarland Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Peter Coogan, ‘Wonder Woman: Superheroine, Not Superhero’, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 9.6 (2018), pp. 566–80, doi:10.1080/21504857.2018.1540137.

<sup>43</sup> Edwin S. Segal, ‘Cultural Constructions of Gender’, in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender: Men and Women in the World’s Cultures Topics and Cultures A-K - Volume 1; Cultures L-Z -*, ed. by Carol R. Ember and Melvin Ember (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2003), pp. 3–10.

<sup>44</sup> *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender: Men and Women in the World’s Cultures Topics and Cultures A-K - Volume 1; Cultures L-Z -*, ed. by Carol R. Ember and Melvin Ember (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2003), pp. xxvi, xxx, 4.

context of how genders and relevant character dynamics are commonly understood in the discussed comics. Batman, the central character of the case-studies, is written as a biological male character who rarely gets involved in physical sex alteration plots. Also, all the selected cases do not contain gender-swapping narratives, so the sex at birth and gender of this character are deemed as male in this dissertation without further challenges, which, after all, is also not the central focus of this research either.

The composition of Batman's gender identity, on the other hand, is examined as a manifestation of masculinity in his character images, with two key concepts relevant to the establishment of this identity. Segal describes the construction of gender as a co-effect of 'signifying elements' and 'performance elements'.<sup>45</sup> The former consists of an individual's material presentation of certain signifying elements that are normatively recognised as a distinguishing feature of a gender, reflecting an embodiment of gendered experience shaped by and through the body. According to Richard M. Zaner, a person's bodily existence unifies the tension between a person's bodily existence being a physical embodiment of the self and an object that negotiates the self with the surrounding world.<sup>46</sup> The embodiment of gender, then, means that individuals' subjectivity in gender identification and recognition is reflected in material existence, such as their bodies and the manipulation of bodily images.

The latter, performance element, means an individual plays a gender role to exhibit gender recognition. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler uses performativity to approach the notion of gender, describing it as 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being'.<sup>47</sup> In this sense, gender is a display of individuals' understanding of norms, which coincides with Simone de Beauvoir's famous argument: 'one is not born, but rather becomes, woman'<sup>48</sup>—in other words, gender is a status constructed by norms. Seeing the realisation of a gender identity as embodiment and as performance has different emphases. Embodiment describes subjective corporeal experience and internalisation of

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<sup>45</sup> Segal, 'Cultural Constructions of Gender', pp. 3-4.

<sup>46</sup> Richard M. Zaner, *The Problem of Embodiment: Some Contributions to a Phenomenology of the Body* (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), p. 196.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Rochester: Vintage Digital, 2014, first published as *Le deuxième sexe* by Simone de Beauvoir, 1949), p. 146.

gender norms, while performativity emphasises actions and behaviours restrained by such norms. Nonetheless, both explanations of gender see it as a dynamically constructed concept rather than an essentialist fact. In Chris Brickell's revision of Butler's theory of gender performativity, it is pointed out that an individual's subjectivity and material existence should be considered a part of their gender identity in addition to their repetitions of social norms.<sup>49</sup> Thus, actively engaging embodiment and performativity in the same analysis can address comics' duality of being static visual-verbal texts and being sequential narratives with time durations: a superhero embodies certain gender features in visual-verbal presentations and performs according to, or against, gender norms in narratives.

Then, in this dissertation's discussions about sexuality, the categorisation of different sexualities also needs a brief clarification. In relevant discussions, I mainly adopt four terms: heterosexuality, homosexuality, homosociality and queerness:

1. Heterosexuality: the sexual attraction, interaction or relationship between individuals of different genders, most dominantly between men and women. This dominant modern sense of heterosexuality is traced back to the 1930s. According to Jonathan Ned Katz, '[o]nly in 1934 does 'heterosexuality' first appear in Webster's hefty *Second Edition Unabridged* defined in what is still the dominant modern mode. There, heterosexuality is finally a "manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality."<sup>50</sup> Also, the connotation of heterosexuality as a sexual preference opposite to homosexuality was also established around the 1930s and has persisted until today,<sup>51</sup> which covers almost the entire history of superhero comics.
2. Homosexuality: the debate over the definition of homosexuality disputes whether it is predominantly signified by conduct such as same-sex intercourse, by behaviours such as atypical gender performance, by same-sex relationships and attractions, or by self-identifications and subcultures.<sup>52</sup> To maintain consistency with the definition of heterosexuality, I use the term homosexuality to refer to the sexual attraction, interaction or relationship between individuals of the same gender. The exclusion of what Stephen O. Murray refers to as 'a separate subculture based on the possibility of same-sex relations' is because Batman largely remains a representation of mainstream heterosexual men in his publication history, suggesting that the major

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<sup>49</sup> Chris Brickell, 'Masculinities, Performativity, and Subversion: A Sociological Reappraisal', *Men and Masculinities*, 8.1 (2005), pp. 24–43, doi:[10.1177/1097184X03257515](https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X03257515), p. 37.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 92.

<sup>51</sup> Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen O. Murray, *Homosexualities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 1-2, 13-15, 382-90.

framework of his character building and storytelling is primarily heteronormative and not in the scheme of homosexual subcultures.

3. Homosociality: a concept proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to describe ‘a continuum between homosocial and homosexual’, covering same-sex relationships, attraction and desires that are neither strictly sexual, i.e. purely built on ‘genital homosexual desire’, nor a strict lack of so.<sup>53</sup> Such a relationship can be atypical, but can also be, or potentially be, accepted as normative in a given cultural context. Yet, they tend to be non-conforming to either homosexuality or pure interest-based relationships, such as affectionate same-sex bonding, non-sexual intimacy or camaraderie.
4. Queerness: in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, ‘queer’ as an identity parallel to heterosexuality is defined as ‘a range of sexual and gender identities that are not ‘straight’, or at least not normative’.<sup>54</sup> This word is also used as a critical stance to challenge the existing categorisations and normative social rules. This dissertation emphasises both the vagueness and subversiveness in its meaning, defining queerness as an umbrella term that covers non-normative or atypical genders and sexualities.

In short, to adapt to the discussions on character dynamics, this thesis adopts the definitions that sexualities are relationship-based, including established relationships such as a character dynamic, and hypothetical or potential relationships that evoke desires.

## Masculinity

Just as the ongoing reflections on sex and gender, ‘masculinity’, as a concept relevant to the differentiation of genders, is also defined in multiple perspectives. In *Masculinities*, Raewyn Connell identifies four approaches to defining masculinity:

1. Essentialist: a descriptive collection of features, as the ‘essence’ of men, that are believed to be significantly generated from physical differences in sexes.
2. Positivist: statistically concluded measures of the characteristics of men.
3. Normative: social norms of the standard behaviours of men.

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<sup>53</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Siobhan B. Somerville, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, ed. by Siobhan B. Somerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 1–15, p.1.

4. Semiotic: a system of symbolic differences achieved by the dynamic contrast of the notions about femininity and masculinity.<sup>55</sup>

The ‘normative’ approach for describing masculinity suits this dissertation more than other approaches. As Cornell argues, using shared aspirations of gender norms to define masculinity would inevitably lead to an image of a drastically above-average man.<sup>56</sup> In other words, in reality, it is rare for individuals to meet the ‘blueprint’ of this idealised, unrealistic man, and thus causes a paradox of masculinity in male identities.<sup>57</sup> Superhero narratives, as a genre defined by idealisation and excess of the ordinary, exactly fit the implication of unachievable standards in normative masculinity, so the problem of limited representativeness in social science is not as detrimental to the literary analysis of superhero comics. In *The Psychology of Superheroes*, Rosenberg and Canzoneri point out that superheroes bear caricatured bodily and behavioural stereotypes of idealised men, including ‘being powerful, both mentally and physically, and initiators in sexual and non-sexual situations’.<sup>58</sup> This exaggerated representation is also described as hypermasculinity, ‘the exaggerated display of what are culturally taken to be macho traits’, to highlight superheroes’ overly perfect portrayals in meeting gender expectations of men.<sup>59</sup> In other words, they are shaped by the synthesis of a common perception of manly characteristics, but at the same time, they are intentionally designed to be more dramatic, larger-than-life and thus more representative of those standards. Superheroes’ extra-ordinariness in gender performance merges the contradiction between what is supposed to be normal and what normal individuals can achieve. Thus, for this dissertation, the masculinity of superheroes is defined as ‘normative masculinity’, to borrow Cornell’s term: the expected social rules for a man’s gender performance and embodiment, such as appearance, qualities and behaviours.

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<sup>55</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities: Second Edition* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 69-70.

<sup>56</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 70.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Robin S. Rosenberg and Jennifer Canzoneri, *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2008), pp. 154, 231-34.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth MacKinnon, *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Media* (London: Arnold, 2003), p. 5.

## Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity can be understood through several overlapping but distinct frameworks. Joseph Marchia and Jamie M. Sommer explore heteronormativity based on Judith Butler's theory of simultaneously constructed social norms, seeing hegemonic-heteronormativity as a system in which hegemonic ideals and heteronormative norms are mutually reinforcing, each reproducing and shaping the other as effects of broader power relations.<sup>60</sup> Marchia and Sommer also build on Adrienne Rich's study of gender and the experiences of homosexuality, emphasising that gendered-heteronormativity highlights how heteronormativity is rooted in gender and male–female social relations, acknowledging that the lesbian experience represents a specific form of stigma different from general heterosexism.<sup>61</sup> Finally, as Robyn Wiegman observes, gender itself functions both as a product of heteronormativity and as one of its key instruments, so that queer studies as a field has largely developed in resistance to heterosexuality's normalising pressures.<sup>62</sup> Taken together, these approaches define heteronormativity as a dynamic system in which gendered power and social ideals continually reinforce one another, and which privileges heterosexuality not only as a normative sexuality, but also as a norm of identity.

## Gaze

In Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking article published in 1975, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', the gaze analysis is proposed to be a framework describing the power dynamics between film audiences as spectators, and actors and actresses as the spectated objects.<sup>63</sup> It describes viewing as an act of pleasurable looking that evokes the spectator's narcissism in self-projection, and/or the exploitative and invasive probation, and the latter is also referred to as fetishism and voyeurism.<sup>64</sup> As pleasure is the key element that differentiates gazing

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<sup>60</sup> Joseph Marchia and Jamie M Sommer, '(Re)Defining Heteronormativity', *Sexualities*, 22.3 (2019), pp. 267–95, doi:[10.1177/1363460717741801](https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717741801).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Robyn Wiegman, 'The Desire for Gender', in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. by George E. Haggerty, Molly McGarry, and Robyn Wiegman (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), pp. 217–36, pp. 217–18.

<sup>63</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Screen*, 16(3), 1975, pp. 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>; Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Springer, 1989), p. 14–28; also see Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2007), pp. 100–134.

<sup>64</sup> Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 21–22.

from practicum, non-pleasurable looking, I use the word looking or viewing to refer to the action of looking, and use gazing when a visual or narrative not only provides a close examination of an element, but also bears the pleasure of identification or objectification.

Mulvey's gaze theory mainly invests in the male gaze, but in this dissertation, I will be very cautious about delegating a specific gender to categorise the structure of gazing. In 'Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)', Mulvey reflected on her terminology usage in 'Visual Pleasure', especially the term, 'male gaze', and explored the potential of female spectators.<sup>65</sup> Mulvey argued that the male gaze remains effective regardless of the gender of individual audiences, as the visual language masculinises the position of the spectator, and the female audience's pleasure is filtered and channelled in the same visual structure.<sup>66</sup> This observation on male dominance in the film industry is valid for a restricted selection of periods and genres, but with the development of visual media and multimodal media, female gaze and queer gaze are also identified in specific media products that aim for a clear target audience. For example, Rina Arya noticed that the female gaze has become more validated along with the rise of consumption of male bodily images since the 1980s.<sup>67</sup> Similar to Mulvey's emphasis on the male gaze, the categorisation of the female gaze and queer gaze also heavily relies on identifying the primary audience within a limited range of media and historical background. As this dissertation does not intend to specify the target audience's gender and sexuality identities, nor pinpoint an era in the comic history, the gaze is regarded as a gender-relevant structure without a definitive gender of the spectators.

## Narrative

Finally, the narrative connects the gaze — the textual representations, and masculinity — the conceptual reflection in such representations. Although the theoretical framework in Chapter Two will explore visual narratives further from the perspective of comic narratology, it is necessary to clarify at the very beginning that 'narrative' is inevitably a multi-purpose term for research that covers both the delivery of a story and the establishment of a concept.

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<sup>65</sup> Laura, Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', in *Popular Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 139–51

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Mary Kosut, *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media* (London: SAGE, 2012), p. 196

As a narratological term, a ‘narrative’ text means ‘a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (‘tells’ the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof’ over a space-time continuum.<sup>68</sup> When applied in comic analysis, this definition, of course, implies that the case-studies by default contain a story, an event or a plot to tell. In *Narrative in Comics*, Henry Pratt observes that ‘[b]ecause our typical experiences of comics are of narratives, the default phenomenology of comics reading entails looking for the stories that they tell’.<sup>69</sup> Admittedly, both comic practices and studies have illustrated the potential of abstraction and nonsequential arrangement.<sup>70</sup> However, since most of the popular superhero comics are based on stories — in other words, they are sequential and narrative comics — ‘narratives’ in the sense of ‘not being abstract or non-sequentially connected’ are used interchangeably as ‘storytelling’ in this dissertation.

On the other hand, when put in the phrase ‘superhero narratives’, a narrative refers to a system of cultural products and presentations that construct a character type of superheroes. In *Gender and Superhero Narratives*, superhero narratives are defined as ‘stories that have superheroes in them’, which deliver the ‘characterization, plot, and relationships between characters, offering more scope for improved representations of gender’.<sup>71</sup> Thus, apart from discussing the story structures and deliveries, I will also use ‘superhero narratives’ when referring to the genre, which reflects the notion that stories can produce cultural impact beyond the stories in juxtapositions of words and images.

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<sup>68</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Henry John Pratt, ‘Narrative in Comics’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67.1 (2009), pp. 107–17

<sup>70</sup> Andrei Molotiu, *Abstract Comics: The Anthology: 1967-2009* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2009), pp. 1-9. Jan Baetens, ‘Abstraction in Comics’, *SubStance*, 40.1, 124 (2011), pp. 94-113.

<sup>71</sup> Michael Goodrum, Tara Prescott-Johnson, and Philip Smith, *Gender and the Superhero Narrative* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), p. 5.

# Chapter 1 Reading Masculinity in Superhero Comics

This chapter is a literature review of superhero comics in gender studies, particularly focusing on the relation between male bodies and masculinity. It begins by outlining male bodies' central position in superhero narratives and their key influence on characterisation. Dealing specifically with masculinity as a part of the character image, the review traces current studies on superheroes' representation of normative masculinity and the disturbance to such norms, especially bodily features and sexuality. Finally, it examines Batman, who holds a mainstream, hypermasculine character image, as a recurring case-study in debates around homosexuality, camp, and queerness. By tracing these discussions, the chapter situates the male superhero body as both a reflection of cultural ideals of masculinity and a source of ongoing critical controversy.

## 1.1 Superhero Comics, a (Nearly) Century-Long Celebration of the Male Bodies

Superhero comics have exerted a profound and enduring influence on modern popular culture since the genre's emergence in the late 1930s. Widely recognised as originating with Superman in *Action Comics* Vol 1 #1 (1938),<sup>72</sup> the superhero archetype has evolved over more than eighty years into a cultural mainstay. These characters have not only entertained generations of readers, but also shaped social values, collective identifications, and cultural imagination on a global scale — often in ways that remain under-acknowledged. The superhero as a cultural figure is highly hybrid, drawing from diverse genres such as horror, science fiction, detective stories, romance, and adventure.<sup>73</sup> This genre of popular comics,

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<sup>72</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, pp. 175-76; Johnson, *Super-History*, pp. 7-8; Brian J. Robb, *A Brief History of Superheroes: From Superman to the Avengers, the Evolution of Comic Book Legends* (London: Hachette UK, 2014); Brian Solomon, *Superheroes!: The History of a Pop-Culture Phenomenon from Ant-Man to Zorro* (Lanham: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2023). It should be noted that *The Phantom* (1936) is also recognised as the first superhero prototype for the protagonist's secret identity (for example, in *Superheroes!* and *The Phantom Unmasked*), but since *The Phantom* was mainly published as comic strips rather than comic periodicals, this thesis follows the general view; see Kevin Patrick, *The Phantom Unmasked: America's First Superhero* (Iowa city: University of Iowa Press, 2017).

<sup>73</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, pp. 175-92.

as a form of visual culture, operates within a broader cultural context in which the consumption and representation of gendered bodies both reflect and participate in shaping societal understandings of masculinity, femininity, and other gender norms, particularly in moments of ideological change. For instance, in the 1980s, the popularity of bodybuilding culture, intersecting with conservative responses to second-wave feminism, normalised hyper-masculine male body imagery.<sup>74</sup> This shift in visual culture associated appearance with dominance and control, contributing to the exaggerated male physiques prevalent in superhero comics of the period.<sup>75</sup> Thus, superhero comics represent a uniquely adaptable and culturally complex form that both reflects and influences sociohistorical change. Positioned at the intersection of everyday accessibility and ideological production, superhero narratives are simultaneously products and producers of dominant cultural discourses. At the heart of these narratives lies the superhero body, a crucial locus where ideals, anxieties, and cultural values are negotiated. Male bodies in superhero comics are not only visually excessive — often stylised and larger than life — but also ideologically loaded, possessing a high visibility in the genre, defining characters’ identities and establishing superheroic ideals.

### 1.1.1 Visibility

Ever since Superman presented his ‘physical marvel’ with a broad-chest character image in *Action Comics* Vol 1 #1,<sup>76</sup> unusually masculine men in skin-tight (and sometimes exceptionally revealing) suits have always been an indispensable spectacle in this genre. Supporting this general impression, the visibility of male bodies in superhero comics can also be well illustrated by a direction of research, or, say, fictional explorations: speculative superhero science. Publications on this topic are represented by a long list of analytical books discussing the probability of superheroes’ bodily functions, modifications and technical enhancements. For instance, the hyper-fixation of attention to Batman’s physicality and anatomical attributes as measurable assets accumulates to an objectifying, almost fetishising attention in *Becoming Batman: The Possibility of a Superhero* (2008), which rationalises the practicality of Batman’s possible physical measurements based on comic visualisation and

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<sup>74</sup> Anna F. Peppard, ‘The Power of the Marvel(Ous) Image: Reading Excess in the Styles of Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, and Rob Liefeld’, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 10.3 (2019), pp. 320–41, doi:[10.1080/21504857.2018.1493520](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2018.1493520), pp. 323–24.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Siegel and Shuster, ‘Superman, Champion of the Oppressed’, p. 1.

potential references to kinetic data of sports performance in real life.<sup>77</sup> From the same series, *Inventing Iron Man* (2011) and *Chasing Captain America* (2018) discuss superhero bodies and enhancing technologies, and similar monographs include *The Science of Supervillains* (2007), *The Physics of Superheroes* (2010), two essay collections titled *The Science of Superheroes* (2003, 2018), and *Marvel Anatomy* (2022), to name a few.<sup>78</sup> Following the (quasi) sci-fi tradition of the superhero narrative,<sup>79</sup> these monographs show a strong yet general interest in the superhero bodies. In comparison, Diana McCallum's *Sex Lives of Superheroes* (2024) adopts a more sexualised lens, discussing how superheroes' ultrahuman physiology and unusual lifestyles could impact their sexual and romantic experience.<sup>80</sup> Even if the analysis and reasoning are mostly based on comic book plots or data fabricated by comic publishers, the researched fictional characters are still hypothetically regarded as realistic figures, based in realistic settings, analysed with realistic scientific theories, and exposed to scopophilic curiosity.

Academic research acknowledging the deeply rooted obsession with male superhero bodies is comparatively less heated but does not lack affirmation. As Aaron Taylor comments, the excessive focus on bodies in superhero comics reveals a fetishising attention on fictional characters' physiques and physicalities,<sup>81</sup> and male characters are no exception to this close examination. Fernández-Menicucci's observation of action films suggests that 'the male-gendered body is conventionally objectified as spectacle more than the female body is.'<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> E. Paul Zehr, *Becoming Batman: The Possibility of a Superhero* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2008).

<sup>78</sup> E. Paul Zehr, *Inventing Iron Man: The Possibility of a Human Machine* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2011); E. Paul Zehr, *Chasing Captain America: How Advances in Science, Engineering, and Biotechnology Will Produce a Superhuman* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2018); Lois H. Gresh and Robert Weinberg, *The Science of Supervillains* (Nashville: Turner Publishing Company, 2007); James Kakalios, *The Physics of Superheroes* (London: Duckworth Books, 2010); Lois H. Gresh and Robert Weinberg, *The Science of Superheroes* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2003); Mark Brake, *The Science of Superheroes: The Secrets Behind Speed, Strength, Flight, Evolution, and More* (New York: Skyhorse, 2018); Marc Sumerak and Daniel Wallace, *Marvel Anatomy: A Scientific Study of the Superhuman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2022).

<sup>79</sup> Angela Ndaliansis, 'Comic Book Superheroes: An Introduction', in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, ed. by Angela Ndaliansis (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 3–15; Jason Bainbridge, "'Worlds Within Worlds": The Role of Superheroes in the Marvel and DC Universes', in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, ed. by Angela Ndaliansis (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 64–85.

<sup>80</sup> Diana McCallum, *Sex Lives of Superheroes: Wolverine's Immortal Sperm, Superman's Porn Career, the Thing's Thing, and Other Super-Sexual Matters Explained* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2024).

<sup>81</sup> "'He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life": Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body", *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40.2 (2007), pp. 344–60, doi:[10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00382.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00382.x).

<sup>82</sup> Amaya Fernández-Menicucci, 'Action and Reaction: The Villain's Body and Its Role in Shaping the Heroic Body in Hollywood Action Films of the 1990s', in *Embodying Masculinities*, ed. by Josep M. Armengol (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 103–23, p. 110.

Action comics, as their statistical counterpart, also share a surprisingly high preference for depicting and appreciating male bodies regardless of whether their plots are romantic or non-romantic. The focus on bodily features in speculative superhero science and in academic observations suggests that superhero comics cultivate a sustained and fetishising fixation on the male body, implying that the appreciation of superheroes' bodily images is a common cultural phenomenon potentially relevant to gender issues.

### 1.1.2 Identity

Superhero physiques are rarely neutral; rather, they function as symbolic embodiments of broader worldviews. For instance, the grotesquely exaggerated Batman in *the Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Batman: Year One* (1987) deliberately conveys the darkness and gravity of his narrative world, while the androgynous, gothic form of Dream in *the Sandman* (1989–1996) disrupts the muscular archetype to highlight the series' literary and intertextual ambitions.<sup>83</sup> For superpowered heroes, ultra-human powers are often reflected in the othered uniqueness of their appearance and gestures.<sup>84</sup> For superheroes without superpowers, the bodily reference to physical abilities is more subtle, yet unignorable. The presentations of their bodies tend to reflect their superhero speciality, and the latter extends the imagination of power limited by the definitive visual presentations of muscles and limbs. Batman's debut, which forms an interesting comparison with the forementioned blunt strength and body-building of Superman, emphasises the physical capabilities in his more agile, slender figure, using verbal descriptions of his combat moves such as 'a terrific right', 'a deadly lock' and 'a mighty heave'<sup>85</sup> — needless to point out the heavy focus on violence and aggression as a demonstration of power and control.<sup>86</sup> Such examples demonstrate how superhero bodies

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<sup>83</sup> Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 1–4 (New York: DC Comics, 1986); Frank Miller and Dave Mazzucchelli, 'Batman: Year One', *DC Comics*, Batman, 1.404–407 (1987); Neil Gaiman, Sam Kieth, and Mike Dringenberg, *Sandman* (New York: DC Comics, 1989), ii.

<sup>84</sup> Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

<sup>85</sup> For the convenience of discussion, capitalisation and other font stylisations that merely concern comic lettering conventions are removed in quotes — in other words, as the majority of dialogues in DC Comics are capitalised as a norm rather than emphasis, I will not keep capitalisation to improve stylisation consistency and avoid distractions. However, other lettering features that deliver tones and emphasis will be kept as original for quicker reference in relevant analysis.

<sup>86</sup> Finger and Kane, 'The Bat-Man', p. 3

are never static but are instead constantly redefined in relation to shifting aesthetic, narrative, and cultural expectations.

If not limited to male bodies, three scholarly monographs comprehensively examine the depiction and fantasy of superhero bodies and their cultural relevance. *Anatomy of the Superhero Film* (2017) by Larrie Dudenhoeffer explores how superhero cinema portrays and extends the human body through an anatomically inspired lens.<sup>87</sup> From the perspective of culture studies, *Superhero Bodies: Identity, Materiality, Transformation* (2018) is an essay collection aiming at answering how the presentations and alternations of superhero bodies deliver identities, ideological stance and subversive potentials.<sup>88</sup> Finally, more specific to comic studies, Jeffrey A. Brown's *Super Bodies: Comic Book Illustration, Artistic Styles, and Narrative Impact* (2023) concludes art stylisation of superhero comics, including idealism, retro, realism, cuteness, grotesque, and noir.<sup>89</sup> It also discusses the cultural roots of these aesthetics and how different styles influence the perception of a superhero's identity and representation.<sup>90</sup> These explorations of bodily images and cultural relevance suggest that the obsession with displaying superhero bodies not only serves the need for spectacles and entertainment, but also reflects a sophisticated negotiation of power and idealisation.

Specifically, the superhero body operates as both a legitimising tool of extraordinariness and a marker of radical otherness, embodying the paradox at the core of the genre. As Scott Jeffery observes, 'readers made sense of the superhuman body as a semiotic code indicating superpowers'.<sup>91</sup> The idealised physiques of superheroes, likened to 'the modern equivalent of the classic nudes found in fine art' by Jeffrey A. Brown,<sup>92</sup> present exaggerated yet recognisable forms that assure audiences of their authenticity and legitimacy as heroes. Ruth J. Beerman's 'The Body Unbound: Empowered, Heroism and Body Image' argues that even vulnerable bodies can serve as rhetorical tools for empowerment, suggesting that the ability

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<sup>87</sup> Larrie Dudenhoeffer, *Anatomy of the Superhero Film* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), doi:[10.1007/978-3-319-57922-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57922-1).

<sup>88</sup> Wendy Haslem, Elizabeth MacFarlane, and Sarah Richardson, *Superhero Bodies: Identity, Materiality, Transformation* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018).

<sup>89</sup> Brown, *Super Bodies*.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Scott Jeffery, *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics: Human, Superhuman, Transhuman, Post/Human* (London: Springer, 2016), p. 236.

<sup>92</sup> Brown, *Super Bodies*, p. 23

to endure injury or hardship paradoxically confirms a superhero's power.<sup>93</sup> For example, in the portrayal of Superman, whose 'invulnerable body: the body that retains no marks, on which history cannot be inscribed,' establishes him as an immortal figure beyond human limitation.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, bodily capabilities derived from superheroes' visual representations are key components of their comic adventure. '[T]he superhero body was read as an iconographic trope of the genre rather than a representation of an existing or achievable reality',<sup>95</sup> as the idealised and fantastical bodies by themselves contain visual-verbal hints about hyper-capability. For example, flexible characters like Nightwing and Spiderman — both in terms of physical capabilities and identity representations — reflect such features in the dynamic motions that direct the reader's gaze and emphasise precarity as much as strength.<sup>96</sup> As for the subversiveness in the superhero body, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (2016) and *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (2014) and *Superhero Bodies* (2018) are key publications on mutations, technological augmentations, ageing, disability, and death, all signalling how far superheroes' bodies diverge from naturalised human forms, transforming extraordinariness into alienness.<sup>97</sup> Synthesising the duality of the superhero body, Darragh Greene and Kate Roddy comment that Grant Morrison's comic art of male bodies at once inspires 'wonder, admiration, envy, and desire — but also fear and disgust'.<sup>98</sup> Superhero bodies, then, imply both empowerment and anxiety, simultaneously naturalised as ideal and othered as monstrous.

Attention to costume and gear adds another dimension to this discussion, revealing how superhero bodies are mediated through dress and disguise. As Barbara Brownie and Danny M. Graydon argue in *The Superhero Costume* (2015), costumes not only reflect historical

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<sup>93</sup> Ruth J. Beerman, 'The Body Unbound: Empowered, Heroism and Body Image', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 3.2 (2012), pp. 201–13, doi:[10.1080/21504857.2012.703959](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2012.703959).

<sup>94</sup> Scott Bukatman, 'A Song of the Urban Superhero', in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. by Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 170–98, p. 179.

<sup>95</sup> Jeffery, *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics*, p. 169.

<sup>96</sup> Charlotte Johanne Fabricius, 'Precarious Lines. Heroism and hyper-capability 90s Nightwing comics', *Akademisk kvarter | Academic Quarter*, 22 June 2020, pp. 92–109, 92-109 Pages, doi:[10.5278/OJS.ACADEMICQUARTER.VI20.5850](https://doi.org/10.5278/OJS.ACADEMICQUARTER.VI20.5850); Sabine Lebel, "'One Down the Boobs, Please!'" Reading the Special Effect Body in Superhero Movies (1)', *CineAction*, no. 77 (June 2009), pp. 56–68.

<sup>97</sup> Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016); José Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014); Haslem and others, *Superhero Bodies*.

<sup>98</sup> Darragh Greene and Kate Roddy, 'Introduction', in *Grant Morrison and the Superhero Renaissance: Critical Essays*, ed. by Darragh Greene and Kate Roddy (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), pp. 1–16.

reality and cultural norms, but also construct identification and alienation, shaping both reader perception and fan practices such as cosplay, which coincides with the themes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's special exhibition and later publication, *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy* (2008).<sup>99</sup> Costumes function as markers of identity, delineating the line between the superhero and the civilian self: Superman's bright red-and-blue uniform openly signals his Kryptonian otherness, while Clark Kent's glasses (as retconned in *Superman Vol 1 #330*) protect his anonymity through deliberate understatement.<sup>100</sup> In *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits* (2021) — another key monograph on bodies, costumes and gender features — De Dauw argues that Superman's masculine dominance 'is partially constructed through the voyeuristic depiction of his body in his skintight costume', further revealing the connection between looking and the superhero's masculine identity.<sup>101</sup> Batman presents an inverted case, where the maskless playboy persona of Bruce Wayne conceals the hero's true self, embodied only when masked as Batman. To some extent, both superheroes illustrate Mike Madrid's observation that '[t]he costumed identity was the fictional invention, while the man who lived behind the mask was the reality',<sup>102</sup> yet they also both embody the vague contradiction in being and performing. As Peter Coogan observes, such costuming devices simultaneously distance heroes from ordinary society and anchor them within the expectations of the superhero genre.<sup>103</sup> These tensions suggest that the costumed identity, often treated as fiction, paradoxically becomes the most authentic expression of the superhero self.

To sum up, current research has established that the superhero body, its visualisation and decorations are core sites defining the character's identity, including the gender identity. Male bodily images in superhero comics are inseparable spectacles in the genre, yet they are not as frequently analysed in the negotiation of gender norms. The following section will discuss broader research on superhero masculinities, emphasising how the entanglement

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<sup>99</sup> Barbara Brownie and Danny M. Graydon, *The Superhero Costume: Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), pp. 11-40; Andrew Bolton and Michael Chabon, *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008).

<sup>100</sup> Scott Bukatman, 'A Song of the Urban Superhero', in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. by Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 170-98, p. 179.

<sup>101</sup> Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), p. 36.

<sup>102</sup> Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Liverpool: Exterminating Angel Press, 2016), p.5.

<sup>103</sup> Peter Coogan, 'The Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the Hero', in *What Is a Superhero?*, ed. by Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter MacFarland Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 6-7.

between sexuality, male bodies and the interpretation of manliness has been implied and even identified, but not comprehensively researched.

## 1.2 The Cultural Anxiety of Superhero Masculinity

Scholarly engagement with masculinity in superhero narratives remains relatively limited compared with other topics in superhero studies. Until very recently, research on male bodies and masculinities within this genre tended to appear as subsections within broader analyses of gender or sexuality in comics, rather than as sustained projects in their own right. The publication of *Superheroes and Masculinity: Unmasking the Gender Performance of Heroism* (2019), edited by Sean Parson and J. L. Schatz, marked the first essay collection entirely dedicated to this subject.<sup>104</sup> It was soon followed by Esther De Dauw and Daniel J. Connell's edited collection *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes* (2020) and Tim Hanley's cultural-historical study *Not All Supermen: Sexism, Toxic Masculinity, and the Complex History of Superheroes* (2022).<sup>105</sup> These recent works highlight both the late scholarly arrival of superhero masculinity studies and the emerging momentum in the field. Prior to these developments, analyses of superhero masculinity were largely embedded within character studies or folded into more general explorations of gender. Even within gender-focused scholarship on superheroes, the emphasis has often fallen on sexuality, queerness, and female representation, with comparatively less systematic research dedicated to men and masculinity. Foundational monographs and essay collections such as *Supersex: Sexuality, Fantasy, and the Superhero* (2020), *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books* (2021), and *Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes* (2021) exemplify this tendency: while all three attend to masculinity at certain moments, they treat it as one strand among many rather than a central analytic concern.<sup>106</sup> Thus, masculinity studies within superhero culture remain comparatively underdeveloped,

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<sup>104</sup> *Superheroes and Masculinity: Unmasking the Gender Performance of Heroism*, ed. by Sean Parson and J. L. Schatz (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

<sup>105</sup> *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes*, ed. by Esther De Dauw and Daniel J. Connell, 1st edn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), doi:[10.14325/mississippi/9781496828934.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496828934.001.0001); Tim Hanley, *Not All Supermen: Sexism, Toxic Masculinity, and the Complex History of Superheroes* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

<sup>106</sup> Anna Peppard, *Supersex: Sexuality, Fantasy, and the Superhero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020); Brown, *Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes*; De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits*.

especially when contrasted with more thoroughly elaborated frameworks such as social justice, philosophy, and education.

When masculinity has been addressed, the critical emphasis has frequently gravitated toward its toxic or non-normative forms, leaving ‘mainstream’ or normative masculinity less theorised despite its centrality to superhero narratives. As *Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes* notes, ‘superhero stories have traditionally valorised a very narrow definition of masculinity based on demonstrations of physical power’.<sup>107</sup> Iconic superheroes, such as Superman and Batman, helped establish this masculinist paradigm by encouraging readers to assume the fictional heroic identity and accept its perspectives on general roles.<sup>108</sup> For instance, Superman’s embodiment of gender features evolves along the social ideals of masculine norms, as Superman’s body build in the Golden Age was wider and bulkier to reflect the idealistic masculinity of the working class, and his physique shrank in the 1950s to adapt to norms for men from the white-collar class.<sup>109</sup> Such observations suggest that, although normative masculinity is widely recognised as foundational to the superhero genre, it has paradoxically attracted less sustained scholarly interrogation than the failure to perform such norms.

### 1.2.1 The Anxiety of Hypermasculinity

Although the exaggerated muscular bodies of superheroes are often seen as the embodiment of exaggerated masculinity,<sup>110</sup> research on hypermasculinity tends to focus on the undesirable association of excessiveness, deviance, and threats. In ‘The Simulacrum of Hypermasculinity in Comic Book Cinema’, Daniel J. Connell argues that the display of amplified muscular male bodies, as eroticized objects as well as dominating objects, contributes to building the hegemony of toxic hypermasculinity.<sup>111</sup> The symbolic opposition

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<sup>107</sup> Brown, *Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes*, p. 15.

<sup>108</sup> Jonita M. Aro, ‘Constructing Masculinity: Depiction of the Superheroes Superman and Batman’, *IUP Journal of English Studies*, 11.1 (2016), pp. 32–38; Ben Grisanti, ‘Melodrama, Romance, and the Celebrity of Superheroes’, pp. 238–52.

<sup>109</sup> De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits*, pp. 30–40.

<sup>110</sup> John Mercer and Clarissa Smith, *Sexualised Masculinity: Men’s Bodies in 21st Century Media Culture* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2025), pp. 63–64.

<sup>111</sup> Daniel J. Connell, ‘The Simulacrum of Hypermasculinity in Comic Book Cinema’, in *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes*, ed. by Esther De Dauw and Daniel J. Connell (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), pp. 19–33.

between superheroes and supervillains further underscores the cultural stakes of masculinity in this genre. Multiple studies have noticed that villainy is commonly presented as hypermasculine — ‘what ought not to be,’ opposite to superheroes’ normative masculinity — what ‘ought to be’.<sup>112</sup> For example, in ‘Witches and Witchbreed in Marvel 1602’, the authors argue that hypermasculinity is villainised via predatory behaviour and sexual perversion.<sup>113</sup> Following Lee Easton’s argument on how villainy disqualifies a male character from normative masculine standards, Buttgerei and others also point out that ‘rather than represented feminine traits, the emotionless and irredeemable male villain is placed in a frame of hypermasculinity.’<sup>114</sup> In this sense, villainy is not merely a matter of evil intent but is implied through a loss of self-regulation: villains are marked by ‘denying them full control over their desires.’<sup>115</sup> The figure of the hypermasculine villain embodies anxieties about uncontrolled aggression and unchecked appetites, positioning him as the dangerous Other against which the superhero is defined.<sup>116</sup> Hypermasculinity thus serves as a narrative device for excess and extremity, setting villains apart not only in terms of morality, but also in terms of gender performance. In this sense, the superhero/villain dichotomy reflects broader cultural distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable masculinities.

### 1.2.2 The Anxiety of Emasculation

The ‘loss’ of masculinity is another frequently noticed narrative in research on superhero stories. Scholarship has increasingly examined how deviations from the hyper-muscular superhero body mark the erosion of masculinity within superhero media. In “‘Why is Your Body a Different Shape?’ Fatness and Masculinity in the Superhero Film’, Barbara Plotz

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<sup>112</sup> W. D. Phillips, ‘Where Did Superman’s White Hat Go? Villainy and Heroism in Superman: Red Son’, in *The Supervillain Reader*, ed. by Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), pp. 337–48, p. 344.

<sup>113</sup> Anne Bialowas and Kevin Cummings, ‘Witches and Witchbreed in Marvel 1602’, in *Superheroes and Masculinity: Unmasking the Gender Performance of Heroism*, ed. by Sean Parson and J. L. Schatz (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), pp. 47–62, p.55.

<sup>114</sup> T. J. Buttgerei, Emily Mendelson, and J. L. Schatz, ‘Poisoning Masculinity Poison Ivy as a Counter-Narrative of Villainy and Trauma through Representations of Queer Love in DC’s Everyone Loves Ivy’, in *Superheroes and Masculinity: Unmasking the Gender Performance of Heroism*, ed. by Sean Parson and J. L. Schatz (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), pp. 111–22, p. 116.

<sup>115</sup> Robert G. Weiner, Robert Moses Peaslee, and Duncan Prettyman, ‘It’s All About the Villains!’, in *The Supervillain Reader*, ed. by Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), p. XIV–XL, p. XXIV.

<sup>116</sup> *Batman’s Villains and Villainesses: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Arkham’s Souls*, ed. by Justin F. Martin and Marco Favaro (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023).

argues that the display of obesity contradicts normative masculinity and renders the male hero less legitimate.<sup>117</sup> Similar functions of non-typical bodily features emerge in analyses of ageing superheroes, such as in essays like ‘I’m Too Old for This #\$\$%: Old Wolverine and Masculinity’ and ‘No Country for Old X-Men: The Aging Hero in *Logan*.’<sup>118</sup> Here, old age functions as a narrative device that diminishes masculine strength, placing the hero within a discourse of decline and emasculation.<sup>119</sup> Resonating with the previous discussions on the studies of bodies and the superhero identity, these essays further confirm the connection between bodily images and gender norms, suggesting that the rendering of male bodies in comics is not only a visual, but also a cultural activity.

Furthermore, sexuality is another frequently discussed topic entangled in the debates of masculine norms, as characters’ romantic and/or sexual interactions have also drawn attention to the ways these dynamics complicate masculinity itself. Studies often situate the instability of masculinity within intersecting concerns of sexuality and bodily representation. For instance, in *Super-Girls and Mild-Mannered Men: Gender Trouble in Metropolis*, Beritela identifies three subversive writing strategies in the portrayal of female superheroes during the 1950s–60s: direct gender swaps, submissive counter-strengths, and powerful challengers.<sup>120</sup> Through psychoanalytic readings of Lois Lane and Kara Zor-El, who are temporary female personas or identities of Superman, Beritela observes that men in the presence of Supergirl are frequently depicted as tamed, domesticated, or submissive, even within narratives still loaded with patriarchal metaphors.<sup>121</sup> These shifts of power highlight how anxieties around male gender identity can underpin the narrative marginalisation of masculinity itself. Heterosexual romance is also found to be at risk of ‘domesticating’ the male hero.<sup>122</sup> The tension between Superman’s heroic identity and his potential marriage to

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<sup>117</sup> Barbara Plotz, “‘Why Is Your Body a Different Shape?’ Fatness and Masculinity in the Superhero Film”, *Fat Studies*, 13.1 (2024), pp. 66–78, doi:[10.1080/21604851.2023.2170551](https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2023.2170551).

<sup>118</sup> Jeffrey A. Brown, “‘I’m Too Old for This #\$\$%.’ Old Wolverine and Masculinity”, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 13.5 (2022), pp. 700–17, doi:[10.1080/21504857.2021.1979614](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2021.1979614); Ljubica Matek and Zvonimir Prtenjača, ‘No Country for Old X-Men: The Aging Hero in *No Country for Old Men* and *Logan*’, *[Sic] - a Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation*, no. 3.10 (June 2020), doi:[10.15291/sic/3.10.lc.2](https://doi.org/10.15291/sic/3.10.lc.2).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Gerard F. Beritela, ‘Super-Girls and Mild-Mannered Men: Gender Trouble in Metropolis’, in *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, ed. by Terrence R. Wandtke (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), pp. 52–69.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Brown, *Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes*, p. 15.

Lois Lane is framed as a symbolic ‘loss of masculinity’, since domestication undermines his role as an unattached fantasy figure. Similarly, Mila Bonco comments on the anxiety against female characters’ presence in a superhero story:

*The subtle rejection of women is presented as a necessary element of the plot in most superhero texts. Women are perceived as threats to male independence and masculinity. Sentiment and emotions among superheroes are presented as a weakness that would detract from the masculine business of adventure and power.*<sup>123</sup>

In this sense, female characters and heterosexual relationships in superhero stories, despite how common they are, potentially destabilise the legitimacy of the superhero masculinity.

In this section, studies of superhero masculinity expose the visibility of unconventional presentations of masculinity, discussing how the diminishment or deviance of masculinity is persistently reflected in the superhero identity, sexuality and the body. The following section will focus on the studies of Batman and gender controversies, which aptly exemplify such a negotiation.

### 1.3 Batman in Controversies: *The Seduction of the Innocent* and More

While masculinity tends to be visible in academic discussions only when deemed unconventional or toxic, wider panics and anxieties over men and gender issues in comics have flooded into general debates and shaped the history of USA comics. One of the most influential — probably the very most — flashpoints came in 1954 with the publication of Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (referred to as *Seduction*).<sup>124</sup> In this polemical psychoanalytical monograph, Wertham argued that comic books, including superhero stories, posed a direct threat to the psychological and moral development of young readers. Among the long list of elements that he believed to be culturally responsible for juvenile delinquency — sex, violence, criminality, and more — his accusations about gender features and sexuality survived more than half a century and remain relevant in comic studies even today. In the sensationally titled chapter, ‘I Want to be a Sex Maniac’, Wertham accused comics of corrupting children through sexually insinuating drawings and sensational depictions of

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<sup>123</sup> Bongco, *Reading Comics*, p. 113.

<sup>124</sup> Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 1st edn (New York: Rinehart & Company, INC, 1954).

bodies, suggesting that these narratives promoted distorted values of gender norms and could potentially induce homosexual desire.<sup>125</sup> These claims were highly controversial, often based on selective, anecdotal and overinterpreted evidence, and inevitably held prejudicial stances against women and homosexuality, which, in Andy Medhurst's influential essay, 'Batman, Deviance and Camp', is humorously rebutted as such:

*Homosexuality, for Wertham, is synonymous with misogyny. [...] Wertham's assumptions of homosexuality are fabricated out of his interpretation of certain visual signs. To avoid being thought queer by Wertham, Bruce and Dick should have done the following: never show concern if the other is hurt, live in a shack, only have ugly flowers in small vases, call the butler 'Chip' or 'Joe' if you have to have one at all, never share a couch, keep your collar buttoned up, keep your jacket on, and never, ever wear a dressing gown.<sup>126</sup>*

Medhurst's ridicule of Wertham's stereotypical textual analysis resonates with many studies on *Seduction's* methodology and perspectives, such as David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague* (1999), Andrew Grunzke's 'Graphic Seduction', and Carol L. Tilley's detailed review of Wertham's resources, transcripts, clinical records and notes in 'Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics'.<sup>127</sup> These theses' challenges to *Seduction's* academic validity suggest that Wertham's findings and arguments might be more relevant to the manipulation of public opinion rather than the fields of psychology and comic studies.

Nonetheless, *Seduction's* long-lasting influence indeed extends beyond clinical analysis of adolescence and mass culture, and even beyond the moral panic in its original context. Published to reflect the USA society in the 1950s, *Seduction's* almost exaggerated ascription of comics to crimes and immorality resonated strongly with Cold War-era anxieties about cultural decline, juvenile delinquency, and the fragility of gender norms. It is commonly agreed by comic historians that *Seduction* was significant to — if not, as argued by Shearon Lowery and Melvin DeFleur, a direct causal-effect trigger of — the Hendrickson-Kefauver

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<sup>125</sup> Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, pp. 173-94

<sup>126</sup> Andy Medhurst, 'Batman, Deviance and Camp', in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. by Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 237–51, pp. 224-39.

<sup>127</sup> David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Macmillan + ORM, 2024); Andrew Grunzke, 'Graphic Seduction: Anti-Homosexual Censorship of Comics in the Postwar Era', *The Journal of American Culture*, 44.4 (2021), pp. 300–17, doi:[10.1111/jacc.13295](https://doi.org/10.1111/jacc.13295); Carol L. Tilley, 'Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics', *Information & Culture*, 47.4 (2012), pp. 383–413.

Senate Hearings that led to the establishment of the Comics Code as censorship authority and potentially the decline of comics as a genre.<sup>128</sup> As Bart Beaty boldly comments, '[i]n the world of comic books, Fredric Wertham may never die', illustrating how *Seduction* has become a notorious cultural landmark that is, as many studies of Wertham and comic censorship vividly describe, 'better known than read', 'remembered as a caricature at best', and symbolised as a 'bogey man' representing authoritative censorship.<sup>129</sup> Extensive research on *Seduction*, such as *Seal of Approval* (1998) by Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Comic Book Nation* (2003) by Bradford W. Wright, *Super-History* (2012) by Jeffrey K. Johnson, and the aforementioned *Ten-Cent Plague*, has been carried out to discuss its context and impact on the comic industry.<sup>130</sup> Until today, critical reflections on the positive potential of *Seduction* continue to illustrate its relevance, such as Bart Beaty's recognition of Wertham's anti-capitalist stance in *Fredric Wertham and the Critiques of Mass Culture* (2005) and Jesse Prevoo's 2023 conference paper, 'Was Wertham Right?', on comics' social impact.<sup>131</sup> As these studies from historical and cultural approaches suggest, although *Seduction's* academic achievement is challengeable, its social impact is undeniably so profound that the book itself becomes a research topic and a cultural monument.

Attracting disproportionate attention for its scholarly merit and social influence, *Seduction's* concerns about moral panics have shifted to encompass questions of sexuality and gender roles, implicitly framing superheroes as destabilising forces that undermined masculine conventions and norms, especially about men's gender roles, heterosexual relationships and queer desires. Among the superhero characters studied in *Seduction*, Batman and his

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<sup>128</sup> Solomon, *Superheroes!*, p. 90; Shearon Lowery and Melvin Lawrence DeFleur, 'Seduction of the Innocent: The Great Comic Book Scare', in *Milestones in Mass Communication Research: Media Effects* (New York: Longman Publishers USA, 1995), pp. 233–66

<sup>129</sup> Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture: A Re-Examination of the Critic Whose Congressional Testimony Sparked the Comics Code* (University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 197–98; Tilley, 'Seducing the Innocent', p. 191; Megan Condis and Mel Stanfill, 'Debating with Wertham's Ghost: Comic Books, Culture Wars, and Populist Moral Panics', *Cultural Studies*, 36.6 (2022), pp. 953–80, doi:[10.1080/09502386.2021.1946579](https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2021.1946579).

<sup>130</sup> Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2003); Johnson, *Super-History*.

<sup>131</sup> Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*; Jesse Prevoo, 'Was Wertham Right? Discussing the Potential Influence of Comics on Its Readership', unpublished paper delivered at the 2023 Joint Conference of the International Graphic Novel & Comics and the International Bande Dessinée Society (Cambridge, 2023).

dynamic with Robin become one of the most influential debates on masculinity and sexuality in superhero comics.

### 1.3.1 Batman Who Seduces: Sexuality Debates

Fredric Wertham's attack on the Batman series in *Seduction* has such a profound cultural impact that it continues to influence comic censorship and public awareness in the following century.<sup>132</sup> Introducing homosexuality as a recurring frame of interpretation, Wertham was one of the first to attack a fictional character explicitly on the grounds of presumed homosexuality, describing the 'Batman type of comic book' as a 'wish dream of two homosexuals living together.'<sup>133</sup> His analysis, couched in loosely Freudian terms, suggested that Batman and Robin's relationship was, not physically (as many misappropriated quotes of *Seduction* suggest), but 'psychologically homosexual', and that such archetypes 'may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies.'<sup>134</sup> As Steven Zani, Lowery and DeFleur, and Patrick Parsons have noted, this framework was far from academically rigorous, relying more on subjective interpretation than systematic analysis, and Beaty adds that Wertham was not immune to the homophobic environment of his era — 'an era when homosexuality was regarded as a mental illness'.<sup>135</sup> Despite these limitations, *Seduction*'s attack on Batman comics made him the first superhero to be contested for sexuality, leaving a continuing impact on the public's reception of his character image: twenty years after its publication, *The Advocate* quoted Wertham's conclusion under a sensational title, 'Wonderwoman, Batman, Robin — Were They Gay'.<sup>136</sup> As Jenée Wilde observes, thirty-five years later and

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<sup>132</sup> Tilley, 'Seducing the Innocent', pp. 383-85; Matt Yockey, *Batman* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), pp 7-9.

<sup>133</sup> Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, p. 190.

<sup>134</sup> Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, pp. 198-91.

<sup>135</sup> Steven Zani, 'It's a Jungle in Here: Animal Man, Continuity Issues, and the Authorial Death Drive', in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 247-63; Lowery and DeFleur, pp. 262-264; Patrick Parsons, 'Batman and His Audience: The Dialectic of Culture', in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. by Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 66-89, doi:[10.4324/9781003370468](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003370468), p. 82; Beaty, Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture, p. 201.

<sup>136</sup> 'Wonderwoman, Batman, Robin — Were They Gay?', *The Advocate* (Los Angeles), no. 198 (September 1976), p. 12.

well into the twenty-first century, ‘the rumor of a gay relationship between Batman and Robin persists up to this day’,<sup>137</sup> illustrating how little its impact fades with time passing.

Subsequent research and exploration have both complicated and expanded these debates, taking two opposite stances regarding Batman and gender issues: some disapprove of the homosexual potential, while others affirm diversified readings. Attacks from comic defenders tend to take the former position, being prone to a very straightforward logic of emphasising the ridiculousness of suggesting two characters with heteroromantic experience being gay. *Dick Grayson, Boy Wonder*, as a research collection dedicated to the character, cautiously points out that, based on historical background and the target audience, it is very unlikely that DC Comics intended to include homosexual implication in their character writing, regardless of readers’ beliefs.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, intensive disagreement from comic enthusiasts, as recorded in *Batman Unmasked* (2013), is illustrated by a series of strongly worded objections to the possibility of a homoerotic undertone in the dynamic duo based on Bruce Wayne’s previous romantic encounters.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, many essays and monographs exaggerate or simplify *Seduction*’s argument into a confirmation of Batman and Robin’s sexuality, such as Jeffery Brown’s brief synthesis of ‘Batman and Robin being a gay couple’, and the outrageous comments by critics in *Batman from 30s to 70s* that ‘a certain psychiatrist decided that a man and a boy living together spelled homosexuality’, which was ‘the most irresponsible slur’.<sup>140</sup> It is interesting to observe that the distress caused by a broadly spreading example of homosexual interpretation can trigger such defensive denials for two fictional characters’ homosexuality, which coincides with Beaty’s ironic argument that ‘Wertham is denounced as an alarmist for even reporting the existence of these fantasies because ironically he is “not homophobic enough”’.<sup>141</sup> Indeed, as Wertham’s alignment of homosexuality with pervasiveness, misogyny and crime illustrates, *Seduction* is inherently

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<sup>137</sup> Jenée Wilde, ‘Queer Matters in The Dark Knight Returns: Why We Insist on a Sexual Identity for Batman’, in *Riddle Me This, Batman!: Essays on the Universe of the Dark Knight*, ed. by Kevin K. Durand and Mary K. Leigh (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), pp. 104–23, pp. 109–10.

<sup>138</sup> Kristen L. Geaman, *Dick Grayson, Boy Wonder: Scholars and Creators on 75 Years of Robin, Nightwing and Batman* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015).

<sup>139</sup> Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2013), pp. 104–05.

<sup>140</sup> Jeffery A. Brown, ‘Marriage, Domesticity and Superheroes (for Better or Worse)’, in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Sexuality in Comic Book Studies*, ed. by Frederick Lius Aldama (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 78–89, p. 79.

<sup>141</sup> Beaty, Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture, p. 201.

homophobic; but outrageously defending the heteronormative environment of mainstream comics is also problematic and riddled with bias.

On the other hand, studies that are more open to queer readings of Batman comics result in interestingly colourful findings. From the perspective of comic history, works like *Batman Unmasked* contextualise the 1950s Batman comics within broader social anxieties about repressed homosexuality and homophobia, showing how, as comic writer Frank Miller commented, the ‘homophobic nightmare is very much part of the Batman/Joker mythos’.<sup>142</sup> The exploration of Batman’s sexuality host contradictory interpretations: comic artist David Mazzucchelli sees Batman as not masculine nor sexual, arguing that ‘it makes perfect sense that his best friend would be a twelve-year-old, because batman is still a little boy stuck in a man’s body’; others, such as *Batman and the Joker* (2020), ‘Batman and Sexuality’ and ‘Queer Matters in the Dark Knight Returns’, affirm the multiplicity in Batman’s sexual identities, discussing how Batman’s different iterations and relationships encourage both heterosexual and queer readings.<sup>143</sup> ‘Deconstructing the Hero-Sidekick Bromance’ further adds homosociality to the picture, explaining how narrative strategies camouflage homoerotic bonding and ‘straighten’ them to relieve heteroanxiety.<sup>144</sup> These observations affirm the validity of different interpretations of the same character, illustrating the complexity of sexualities in Batman comics.

Furthermore, several more affirmative studies embrace the implicit queerness in other characters from the Batman franchise, for instance, highlighting Nightwing’s pansexual attractiveness and the Joker’s flamboyant camp ‘in subversive contrast to the ordered,

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<sup>142</sup> Christopher Sharrett, ‘Batman and the Twilight of the Idols: An Interview with Frank Miller’, in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 33–46, p. 37.

<sup>143</sup> David Mazzucchelli, ‘Afterword(s)’, in Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli, *Batman: Year One*, the Deluxe Edition (Burbank: DC Comics, 2017); Chris Richardson, *Batman and the Joker: Contested Sexuality in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2020); Jeffrey A. Brown, ‘Batman and Sexuality: Secret Identities, Lust and Romance’, in *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity: The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero as Cultural Nexus* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018); Jenée Wilde, ‘Queer Matters in The Dark Knight Returns: Why We Insist on a Sexual Identity for Batman’, in *Riddle Me This, Batman!: Essays on the Universe of the Dark Knight*, ed. by Kevin K. Durand and Mary K. Leigh (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), pp. 104–23.

<sup>144</sup> Anne Bialowas and Ryan Check, ‘Deconstructing the Hero-Sidekick Bromance: Foggy, Rato and the Masculine Performance of Friendship’, in *Superheroes and Masculinity: Unmasking the Gender Performance of Heroism*, ed. by Sean Parson and J. L. Schatz (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), pp. 13–28.

uptight Batman'.<sup>145</sup> The duality of Batman and his civilian identity, Bruce Wayne, is also interpreted to be loaded with queer coding: 'Bruce and Batman both encode a cultural stereotype of the male homosexual — Bruce is a fairy, and Batman is a secretive, hypermasculine character who spends a lot of time prowling city streets at night — the Bruce/Batman dyad is itself a figure for a gay couple', as Sasha Torres comments.<sup>146</sup> Considering that Batman and Nightwing — the former Robin in Wertham's time — were at the centre of *Seduction's* moral panic, such arguments indeed challenge the homophobic denial of Batman comics' queer potential and destabilise the narrative's heteronormative assumptions. As Rob Lendrum notes in 'Queering Super-Manhood,' the industry itself has gradually adapted, moving from the homosexual panic of the 1950s through the camp aesthetics of the 1960s to attempts at re-heterosexualizing Batman and Robin, exemplified by the female Robin, Carrie Kelley, in the 'Dark Knight' series, in later decades.<sup>147</sup> Yet, the persistence of this debate — over whether Batman is 'straight or gay,' whether the Batman/Robin bond is homoerotic, and whether such readings are subversive or absurd — reveals what Jenée Wilde calls the 'opportunity present in Batman's character.'<sup>148</sup> The lack of a definitive answer, rather than closing the question, exposes an interesting paradox in Batman's cultural influence: as an extremely important superhero and a macho myth, Batman catches attention and criticism for even the slightest potential of unconventional gender and sexual features, which in turn expands his representativeness of masculine normalcy.

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<sup>145</sup> Micah McCrary, 'Queer(Ing) Robin: Performances of Sexuality in Dick Grayson and His Aliases', in *The DC Comics Universe: Critical Essays*, ed. by Douglas Brode (Jefferson: McFarland, 2022), pp. 42–53; Will Brooker, 'Afterword', in *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*, ed. by Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (University Press of Mississippi, 2015), pp. 243–45, p. 244.

<sup>146</sup> Torres, *The Caped Crusader of Camp*, p. 332.

<sup>147</sup> Rob Lendrum, 'Queering Super-Manhood: The Gay Superhero in Contemporary Mainstream Comic Books', *Journal for the Arts, Sciences, and Technology*, 2.2 (2004), pp. 69–73; Nathan G. Tipton, 'Gender Trouble: Frank Miller's Revision of Robin in the Batman: Dark Knight Series', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 41.2 (2008), pp. 321–36, doi:[10.1111/j.1540-5931.2008.00505.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2008.00505.x).

<sup>148</sup> Jenée Wilde, 'Queer Matters in *The Dark Knight Returns*: Why We Insist on a Sexual Identity for Batman', in *Riddle Me This, Batman!: Essays on the Universe of the Dark Knight*, ed. by Kevin K. Durand and Mary K. Leigh (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), pp. 104–23, p. 121.

### 1.3.2 Batman, Camp, and the Entanglement of Sexuality and Masculinity

The discussions on homoeroticism and queer coding in the Batman series are not limited to homosexual representations in hegemonic heteronormativity. Rather, they often entangle with the masculine aspect of Batman's superhero identity. Batman's origin story, featuring the loss of parental figures, is argued to be the central myth of his identity, which reaffirms his role as a patriarchal figure deeply invested in nuclear family values.<sup>149</sup> In Batman's publication history, his continuing growing family of Robins and other bat-inspired characters illustrates the compulsion of reproducing the normative ideals of being not only a good son, but also a good father. At the same time, this performance of normative masculinity also contains the force to deconstruct such norms. Developing the observation of the patriarchal structure in Batman's character dynamics, Torres further argues that, by anchoring the superhero identity on personal trauma, the myth of Batman's origin thereby naturalises Bruce's vigilante career as an act of masculine agency and frames it as the 'self-evident' solution to parental loss.<sup>150</sup> 'Batman and Robin: A Family Romance' takes a different approach, applying psychoanalysis to explore the motives of fantasising Batman and Robin as masculine ideals and point out the family-based yet romantic undertone in their dynamics.<sup>151</sup> These discussions suggest that, in Batman stories, sexuality and masculinity are inseparable elements in the establishment of his identity.

Camp, as a cultural phenomenon rooted in homosexual aesthetics and embodying subversive potential beyond sexuality debates,<sup>152</sup> further expands Batman's representation as a cultural icon. Susan Sontag's classic essay *Notes on 'Camp'* defines camp as 'of artifice and exaggeration,' and it 'converts the serious into the frivolous.'<sup>153</sup> The history of Batman on screen is marked by an enduring association with camp, even if this association has not always been welcomed by fans, critics, or creators. Long before Adam West's brightly coloured 1960s television version, Batman's first cinematic appearance in the 1943 serial

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<sup>149</sup> Torres, *The Caped Crusader of Camp*, p. 331; Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* (London: I.B. Tauris & Company Limited, 2012), pp. 196-97.

<sup>150</sup> Torres, *The Caped Crusader of Camp*, p. 331.

<sup>151</sup> Robert Lang, 'Batman and Robin: A Family Romance', *American Imago*, 47.3/4 (1990), pp. 293-319.

<sup>152</sup> Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London: Penguin UK, 2018), note 51.

<sup>153</sup> Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, p. 1.

already contained elements of low-budget camp and wartime melodrama, though less overtly flamboyant than what followed.<sup>154</sup> As Andy Medhurst later observed, Batman had ‘unwittingly, always been camp —it was serious (the tone, the moral homilies) about the frivolous (a man in a stupid suit).’<sup>155</sup> Camp was thus less an aberration than a latent element of the Batman mythos, one that became impossible to ignore in later decades. George Melly described camp as ‘knowing’, theatrical, and self-mocking, a sensibility that resonated with both art circles and mass audiences during the 1960s counterculture.<sup>156</sup> In this way, camp quickly became embedded in the cultural image of Batman, blurring boundaries between children’s entertainment, queer aesthetics, and ironic chic.

Yet, camp has often been criticised as a blemish on Batman’s legacy, especially by those invested in defining what counts as a ‘serious’ or authentic superhero story. Comic writer Dennis O’Neil dismissed the Batman of the 1950s as ‘Batman-lite’ and condemned the 1966 *Batman* television series for placing the character in ‘inappropriate contexts’ and ‘lampooning’ him, which is also applied to other comic adaptations such as *The Punisher* and *The Hulk*, with a worry that camp undermined their potential for maturity and public respect.<sup>157</sup> In such views, camp is equated with ‘silliness,’ a limitation in quality, and a lack of depth — something that serious adaptations must avoid in order to elevate the genre. This binary is reflected in broader critical discourses, where the ‘good’ Batman is associated with darkness, violence, machismo, rationality, and authenticity, while the ‘bad’ Batman is linked to brightness, camp, homoeroticism, and frivolity.<sup>158</sup> Even William Dozier, producer of the 1966 series, came to admit his dislike of camp, acknowledging how far the show’s tone drifted from his original intentions, especially when it is associated with queerness and homosexual implications.<sup>159</sup> The backlashes on a camp Batman, which are generated by both the anxiety of losing authority and breaking heteronormativity, open Batman to questions of

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<sup>154</sup> Kevin K. Durand, ‘Batman’s Canon: Hybridity and the Interpretation of the Superhero’, in *Riddle Me This, Batman!: Essays on the Universe of the Dark Knight*, ed. by Kevin K. Durand and Mary K. Leigh (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), pp. 81–92, p. 88; *Batman*, dir. by William Dozier (Los Angeles, 1966); *Batman*, dir. by Lambert Hillyer (Los Angeles, 1943).

<sup>155</sup> Medhurst, *Batman, Deviance and Camp*, p. 244.

<sup>156</sup> George Melly, *Revolt into Style: The Pop Arts* (Ann Arbor: Anchor Books, 1971), p. 177.

<sup>157</sup> Dick Giordano, Neil Adams, and Dennis O’Neil, *Batman in the Seventies* (New York: DC Comics, 1999), p. 23; Lowry Brian, ‘Getting Serious About Comicbook Adaptations: Superhero Pics and Series Have Found a Middle Ground Between Camp and Pretentiousness’, *Daily Variety*, 284.27 (2004), p. 4.

<sup>158</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. 119

<sup>159</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, p. 225.

sexuality and alternative masculinities by revealing the deep entanglement of these two topics.

Despite the criticism, camp remains inseparable from Batman's cultural legacy and inspires reflections on masculine norms with mimics and mockeries. As Will Brooker argues, because of the 1960s series, 'Batman's associations with camp — in both 'mainstream' and 'underground' senses — will never be forgotten for as long as the character survives', which is agreed by Cyrus R.K. Patell in his research on Batman iterations.<sup>160</sup> The camp iteration of Batman is remembered as an approachable, relatable character for breaking the mask of hypermasculine display as 'the most human of all'.<sup>161</sup> Others like Rob Lendrum emphasise that camp can be a subversive force that destabilises heteronormativity and creates space for multiple interpretations of masculinities to co-exist.<sup>162</sup> Brooker celebrates Batman's mythos as it embraces all its facets, not only the grim brutality of *The Dark Knight Returns*, but also the flamboyance, grotesquerie, masquerade, and queerness that camp insists on bringing to the surface.<sup>163</sup> Thus, camp is not simply a regrettable detour in Batman's history, but an ongoing reminder of how the character can unsettle the 'normal' and enrich our understanding of masculinity itself, incorporating the debates on sexuality into the discussions of broader gender norms.

## 1.4 Pointing Forward: Masculinity in the Superhero Body

This chapter has reviewed how male bodies in superhero comics are consistently central to the genre's visual and narrative strategies: they are highly visible, spectacularised, and crucial in conveying identity. Bodily images not only legitimate superheroes' extraordinariness, but also frame them as cultural models of masculinity. Yet, as the survey of existing scholarship shows, sustained critical attention tends to gravitate toward unconventional or disruptive masculinities rather than the mainstream, leaving normative

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<sup>160</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, p. 227; Cyrus R.K. Patell, 'Deconstructing Batman, Encumbered and Unencumbered', in *The DC Comics Universe: Critical Essays*, ed. by Douglas Brode (Jefferson: McFarland, 2022), pp. 25–41, p. 36.

<sup>161</sup> Kevin K. Durand, 'Why Adam West Matters: Camp and Classical Virtue', in *Riddle Me This, Batman!: Essays on the Universe of the Dark Knight*, ed. by Kevin K. Durand and Mary K. Leigh (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), pp. 41–53, p. 45.

<sup>162</sup> Lendrum, 'Queering Super-Manhood', p. 72.

<sup>163</sup> Will Brooker, 'The Best Batman Story: The Dark Knight Returns', in *Beautiful Things in Popular Culture* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2007), pp. 33–48, doi:[10.1002/9780470690994.ch2](https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470690994.ch2).

forms underexplored. Batman exemplifies this dynamic: his body and sexuality have been most intensely debated when read as queer or camp, that is, when they appear to challenge hegemonic masculine or heterosexual norms. The gap, therefore, lies in the paradox that, while male superhero bodies are central to the genre, in critical and academic discussions, they are often overlooked or treated as self-evident. This gap suggests a presumed legitimacy or default status of masculinity within the genre, and points to the need for closer interrogation of how male bodies in superhero narratives function simultaneously as reflections of cultural ideals and as controversial triggers.

## Chapter 2 Gaze in Multimodal Textual Analysis

This chapter starts with an overview of gaze analysis of superhero comics, arguing that, despite the gaze theory's frequent application in the criticism of gender inequality and the hyper-sexualisation of women in superhero comics, its potential remains underexplored when it comes to analysing how readers engage with, and take pleasure in, the representation of male protagonists' bodies. Therefore, the following section introduces a framework for examining the gaze as it operates in relation to male superheroes, treating the reading experience as a layered interaction between spectator and spectated. To conduct this analysis, it draws on the visual-verbal language and stylistic techniques of comic art as cues that guide the reader's gaze and encode psychoanalytical meanings within bodily representations. Batman comics serve as the primary case-study, which is regarded as a transhistorical cultural complex. Finally, the chapter outlines a structured analytical form that will organise these observations, guiding the discussion from formal mechanisms of gazing to their broader implications for the construction and contestation of masculinity in superhero narratives.

### 2.1 Current Gaze Studies in Superhero Comics

Laura Mulvey's landmark essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) introduces the concept of the male gaze, shifting attention from women's self-presentation to the ways

in which male artists and audiences collectively enact power over female bodies.<sup>164</sup> Despite limitations in its original context and theoretical framework, Mulvey's model remains foundational in visual culture studies, providing a critical method for analysing the relationship between looking, pleasure, and power. Mulvey defines the male gaze as a pleasure-driven, gendered act of looking in visual texts that shapes subjectivity and imposes power over female characters.<sup>165</sup> Drawing on Freud and Lacan, she aligns the concept of gaze — literally, the audience's act of looking — with gendered power relations.<sup>166</sup> In this way, Mulvey expands the notion of gaze from a neurological and philosophical concept of self-awareness (as in Del Bianco and others and Astor & Gredebäck's discussions of infants' cognitive development through gaze, for instance) into an analytic tool for visual culture.<sup>167</sup> The gaze theory distinguishes between two types of scopophilic pleasure: voyeurism, the sexualised act of objectifying another person, and narcissism, the ego satisfaction of identifying with a fictional character.<sup>168</sup> In highlighting both, Mulvey establishes a framework that not only engages with the objectified bodily images that bear sexualised interest, but can also illuminate how spectators might engage with characters with strong agency, such as superheroes.

Despite such potential, Mulvey's research primarily focuses on the female representation in a context of hegemonic heterosexuality, which is also the case in most gaze studies of superhero comics. While queer studies (e.g., Joan Copjec, Richard Dyer, Steve Neale) question her binary model of gender positions and highlight the ubiquity of bisexual

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<sup>164</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 833–44; also see Laura Mulvey, 'From a Faculty Seminar with Laura Mulvey: Reflections on Visual Pleasure: Vanderbilt University, November 10, 2016, Compiled and Edited by Lara Casey', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 15.4 (2017), pp. 385–87, doi:[10.1080/17400309.2017.1377923](https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2017.1377923).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.; Laura Mulvey, 'Unmasking the Gaze: Some Thoughts on New Feminist Film Theory and History', *Lectora*, 7 (2001), 5–14, 5.

<sup>166</sup> Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', pp. 835–36; Roberta Sassatelli, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28.5 (2011), pp. 123–43, doi:[10.1177/0263276411398278](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411398278).

<sup>167</sup> Teresa Del Bianco and others, 'The Developmental Origins of Gaze-Following in Human Infants', *Infancy: The Official Journal of the International Society on Infant Studies*, 24.3 (2019), pp. 433–54, doi:[10.1111/inf.12276](https://doi.org/10.1111/inf.12276); Kim Astor and Gustaf Gredebäck, 'Chapter Seven - Gaze Following in Infancy: Five Big Questions That the Field Should Answer', in *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, ed. by Jeffrey J. Lockman (JAI, 2022), lxiii, pp. 191–223, doi:[10.1016/bs.acdb.2022.04.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.acdb.2022.04.003).

<sup>168</sup> Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', pp. 835–37. In literature and art criticism, scopophilia only refers to libidinal pleasure stimulated by looking and does not necessarily involve pathological medical conditions. For scopophilia in sexology instead of gender studies, see Tudor Popa and Cristian Delcea, 'Voyeurism and Scopophilia', *International Journal of Advanced Studies in Sexology*, 1.1 (2019), 53–55.

tendencies, most studies of gaze in popular culture continue to assume heterosexuality as the default, and the assumptions of gender roles have generally gone unchallenged.<sup>169</sup> Within superhero comics, this has meant that scholarship overwhelmingly focuses on the sexualisation of female characters. For instance, comic studies of gender stereotypes, such as Edward Avery-Natale, and Christina M. Knopf, apply the male gaze to explain the hyper-sexualised distortion of female bodies in superhero comics.<sup>170</sup> It is pointed out that female characters, often designed as second-rate sidekicks, companions, or love interests for male protagonists, tend to be spectacularised with disproportionate bodily features yet underdeveloped in characterisations, which coincides with Arron Taylor’s study of superhero bodies.<sup>171</sup> Specifically, Avery-Natale measures the body proportions of sample female and male superheroes to argue that women’s bodies are hyper-sexualised to cater for male audiences’ viewing pleasure.<sup>172</sup> This design pattern has fuelled the stereotype of superhero comics as a ‘men’s culture’ and contributed to feminist rejection of the genre — for instance, the women’s bookshop that refused to carry *Dirty Plotte*.<sup>173</sup> Considering the systematic patriarchal dominance and the marginalisation of female participants in the early comic industry,<sup>174</sup> it is not surprising that comics, especially superhero comics, are frequently considered a masculinist cultural product produced by men and for men. Similar critiques are found in Esther De Dauw’s *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits*, which examines superhero costumes and bodies through gender and queer perspectives.<sup>175</sup> Drawing on Denzin’s definition of the male gaze as a ‘controlling and curious gaze,’ De Dauw, like many of the contemporaries, emphasises voyeuristic pleasure while largely overlooking

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<sup>169</sup> Clifford T. Manlove, ‘Visual “Drive” and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey’, *Cinema Journal*, 46.3 (2007), 83–108, 85–87.

<sup>170</sup> Edward Avery-Natale, ‘An Analysis of Embodiment among Six Superheroes in DC Comics’, *Social Thought & Research*, 32 (2013), pp. 71–106; Christina M. Knopf, ‘The Queen of Burlesque: The Subtle (as a Hammer) Satire of Bomb Queen’, in *Gender and the Superhero Narrative* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), pp. 101–23.

<sup>171</sup> Aaron Taylor, ‘“He’s Gotta Be Strong, and He’s Gotta Be Fast, and He’s Gotta Be Larger Than Life”: Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40.2 (2007), pp. 344–60, doi:[10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00382.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00382.x).

<sup>172</sup> Avery-Natale, ‘An Analysis’, 73–76.

<sup>173</sup> Rachel R. Miller, ‘When Feminism Went to Market: Issues in Feminist Anthology Comics of the 1980s and ’90s’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies*, ed. by Frederick Luis Aldama (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 0, doi:[10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190917944.013.42](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190917944.013.42).

<sup>174</sup> Peyton Brunet and Blair Davis, *Comic Book Women: Characters, Creators, and Culture in the Golden Age* (University of Texas Press, 2022), pp. 21–22.

<sup>175</sup> De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits*.

narcissistic identification.<sup>176</sup> Other works, such as Mike Madrid's *The Supergirls* and Anna F. Peppard's introduction in *Supersex*, similarly document the passive and over-sexualised depiction of superheroines.<sup>177</sup> Interestingly, also examining the depiction of female bodies in superhero comics, Carolyn Cocca discusses the function of visual sexualisation of female bodies and points out readers' agency, female readers included, in shaping such depictions,<sup>178</sup> which implies that the libidinal pleasure in the male gaze is potentially overgeneralised. While the studies of superheroine bodies persuasively show patterns of objectification, they risk simplifying readership by overemphasising male sexual pleasure and neglecting the complexity of identification.

Debates about the gaze in superhero comics have increasingly turned toward male superheroes, though often through the lens of an assumed reader group. While research on the sexual objectification of male bodies is less common, it is not absent. For instance, Sophia Staite proposes that the maternal gaze, a non-romantic type of female gaze, has a significant impact on corporeal aesthetics that renders certain male superheroes' body types less bulky than their typical physiques.<sup>179</sup> Also examining bodily representations, Peppard examines both the queer male gaze and the female gaze in relation to superheroes' physiques.<sup>180</sup> As Peppard noted, the female audience's impact on masculine multiplicity in superhero comics has been underexplored despite its long history,<sup>181</sup> illustrating how the demographic of readership cannot — like Avery-Natale's study — be simplified as heterosexual cisgender men. These perspectives of non-male gaze demonstrate that male superheroes can also occupy the position of the objectified, and that female and queer readerships complicate Mulvey's assumption of a strictly heterosexual, male spectator.

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<sup>176</sup> See, for example, *Ibid.*, p. 71; Norman K. Denzin, *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur's Gaze* (London: SAGE Publications, 1995).

<sup>177</sup> Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Ashland, Or.: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009); Peppard, *Supersex*, pp. 1-30.

<sup>178</sup> Carolyn Cocca, 'The "Broke Back Test": A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Portrayals of Women in Mainstream Superhero Comics, 1993–2013', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 5.4 (2014), pp. 411–28, doi:[10.1080/21504857.2014.916327](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2014.916327).

<sup>179</sup> Sophia Staite, 'Superhero Bodies (That) Matter: Costuming the Male Body in Kamen Rider.', *Mechademia*, 17.1 (2024), pp. 81–93.

<sup>180</sup> Peppard, *Supersex*, pp. 221-44; Anna Peppard, "'Is That a Monster Between Your Legs or Are Ya Just Happy to See Me?': Sex, Subjectivity, and the Superbody in the Marvel Swimsuit Special', in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Sexuality in Comic Book Studies*, ed. by Frederick Lius Aldama (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 90–106.

<sup>181</sup> Peppard, *Supersex*, p. 230.

Compared with the extensive scholarship on voyeuristic looking at women, the narcissistic gaze on male bodies remains relatively underexplored, both in literature and specifically in comic studies. Voyeurism has attracted attention because of its critical potential for revealing or resisting gender inequality, as illustrated by Boyle's analysis of violence in the male gaze, Figlerowicz's work on lesbian photography, and Goldin's exploration of the 'reversive gaze.'<sup>182</sup> By contrast, narcissistic looking is often collapsed into a desexualised notion of self-identification. Later studies, such as Woodward's analysis of the 'benevolent gaze in literature, similarly detach narcissism from sexuality, treating it instead as aesthetic or ego-affirming pleasure.<sup>183</sup> This desexualisation conflicts with Mulvey's reference to libidinal investment in narcissism, which is affirmed in broader research about sexual dimensions of narcissistic self-gazing. Grindstaff and Valencia, for example, suggest that selfies allow individuals to control and invite sexualised gazes, while Schlig identifies the interplay of female narcissism and male gaze in Spanish literature.<sup>184</sup> These studies show that the gazed subject can simultaneously occupy the positions of self-spectator and object of others' viewing. Though often examined in the presence of a voyeuristic third party, they nonetheless point toward the erotic potential of narcissistic scopophilia.

As for male gazes on men in a heterosexual context, such gazes highlight an underexplored avenue of homosociality, a concept first proposed by Eve Sedgwick in *Between Men* (1985) to describe male bonding that blends interest-based and erotic desire.<sup>185</sup> Then, in the following book, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), she further questions binarism in various aspects of gender-related issues, such as male and female, passive and active.<sup>186</sup> By arguing for the varieties of gender and sexuality as complexities and continuums, Sedgwick's queer

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<sup>182</sup> Karen Boyle, *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004); Marta Figlerowicz, 'Lesbian Photographers: Affect and Cinematic Self-Discovery', in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Theory*, ed. by Kyle Stevens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 258-73, doi:[10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190873929.013.30](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190873929.013.30); Daniel Goldin, 'A Male Glance at the "Male Gaze"', *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 42.7 (2022), pp. 601-10, doi:[10.1080/07351690.2022.2121150](https://doi.org/10.1080/07351690.2022.2121150).

<sup>183</sup> Kathleen Woodward, 'The Look and the Gaze: Narcissism, Aggression, and Aging', *SubStance*, 18.1 (1989), p. 74, doi:[10.2307/3685030](https://doi.org/10.2307/3685030).

<sup>184</sup> Laura Grindstaff and Gabriella Torres Valencia, 'The Filtered Self: Selfies and Gendered Media Production', *Information, Communication & Society*, 24.5 (2021), pp. 733-50, doi:[10.1080/1369118X.2021.1874480](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1874480); Michael Schlig, '(D)Espejos: Neoclassic Aesthetics, Female Narcissism and the Male Gaze in Enlightenment Spain', *Dieciocho: Hispanic Enlightenment*, 34.2 (2011), p. 367.

<sup>185</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 1-3.

<sup>186</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1990), p. 15.

theory challenges the polarised gender dynamic Mulvey adopts from Freud's studies. Homosocial gaze, which is rarely examined as a mature term but can accurately describe such ambiguity, sheds light on how a narcissistic identifying gaze can have implications for gendered traits. Brownie and Graydon's *The Superhero Costume*, for instance, explores how masks and costumes establish superhero identities, arguing that costume design, for example, often facilitates readers' identification by signalling a hero's transformation from ordinary person to extraordinary figure.<sup>187</sup> The 'superheroised' ego, embodied in hypermasculine costumes such as Superman's, encourages readers to see themselves reflected in heightened masculine ideals. Similarly, *Masque-ulinities, Anatomy of the Superhero Film*, and 'Superheroes' in *Fashion and Masculinities in Popular Culture* also emphasise the importance of bodily transformation, especially the comparison of naked male bodies and their superhero costumes.<sup>188</sup> The exposure of male bodies opens the possibility of a sexualised gaze upon male figures, highlighting the potential sex-relevant undertone and the uniformity of voyeurism and narcissism.

As current gaze studies of audiences' identities and the perception of superhero bodies illustrate an entanglement of pleasures and multiplicity of spectatorship, they open a gap in alternative methodology that approaches gaze without assuming reader groups. From the perspective of art critics, a few scholarly works turn to art-historical theories to analyse visual elements and artistic techniques. For instance, Callen contrasts pastel drawings with photographs in Henry Tonks's medical records, showing that the pastel medium can foster an intimate homosocial gaze.<sup>189</sup> Similarly, Alison Smith, Temma Balducci, and Stephen Kern use comparable frameworks to examine art autonomy, paint handling, perspective, and composition.<sup>190</sup> Their findings reveal a strong pattern of body exaggeration as a strategy to invite sexualising gazes as well as inspiring ego-centric projections within fictional power

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<sup>187</sup> Brownie, and Graydon, 'Identity, Role and the Mask', in *The Superhero Costume*.

<sup>188</sup> Friedrich Weltzien, 'Masque-Ulinities: Changing Dress as a Display of Masculinity in the Superhero Genre', *Fashion Theory*, 9.2 (2005), pp. 229–50, doi:[10.2752/136270405778051374](https://doi.org/10.2752/136270405778051374); Larrie Dudenhoefter, *Anatomy of the Superhero Film* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), doi:[10.1007/978-3-319-57922-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57922-1); Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Fashion and Masculinities in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>189</sup> Anthea Callen, *Looking at Men: Anatomy, Masculinity and the Modern Malebody* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>190</sup> Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 171–185; Temma Balducci, *Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture: Beyond the Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 65–76; Stephen Kern, *Eyes of Love: The Gaze in English and French Paintings and Novels, 1840–1900*, *Picturing History* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), pp. 153–162.

dynamics; such gazes are not limited to the pleasure of a strictly defined group of spectators of a certain sexuality or gender identity. This line of research has been especially productive for understanding the gaze and the representation of male bodies in art history, suggesting that textual analysis of visual style and techniques can explore how an image is intended to be viewed, or, in other words, how the gaze is manipulated for specific intents. As comics are primarily visual-verbal arts, textual analysis of their verbal texts, illustrations and visual narratives can avoid overgeneralisation of their developing reader groups and focus on how superhero bodies are presented via the lens of gazing and their representation of masculinities.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this thesis, the ‘construction of masculinity’ is examined as a discursive process that operates through the interplay of visual, verbal, and narrative devices within comics. Each issue functions as an interlinked system in which separate techniques, such as bodily display, narrative emphasis, or visual exaggeration, work together to create gaze and reinforce or revise representations of gendered traits with imbalanced power dynamics. Mulvey’s theory establishes the connection between power and gaze, and the impact of gaze shapes both the spectators and the gazed objects. As Patrick Fuery suggests, the gazed object, in this case, male superhero bodies, does not simply remain passive but can redirect the gaze back to the spectator.<sup>191</sup> This reflexive dynamic illustrates that gaze not only projects power on the spectated, but also challenges the spectator. In this way, masculinity is negotiated through a reciprocal process of gazing where initiative and passivity are exchanged, making gaze an important mechanism in establishing and regulating norms of masculinity.

To explore the gaze in superhero comics, textual analysis offers a productive approach. The history of the superhero genre spans more than a century, rendering attempts to profile patterns of readership often unreliable and over-generalising.<sup>192</sup> For example, in 2015, DC Comics released an official announcement about promoting inclusiveness and accessibility

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<sup>191</sup> Patrick Fuery, ‘The Gaze: Masochism, Identification and Phantasy in the Spectator’, in Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2000), pp. 6–23, doi:[10.1007/978-0-333-98569-4\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-333-98569-4_2).

<sup>192</sup> Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 17.

with more modern, relevant storytelling approaches that reflect the current society.<sup>193</sup> However, analysis of the texts themselves provides a more practical and consistent ground for inquiry, as the organisation of words, images and narratives navigates attention to create gazes, even though in most cases the line of gazing is invisible. Following Lacan's notion of the gaze as 'objet petit a' — an absent object that nonetheless structures desire — McGowan argues that the gaze 'is the point around which this field organises itself.'<sup>194</sup> In comics, this suggests that while gazing is not always directly depicted, readers can infer and reconstruct an intended gaze from the choices of panel composition, visual emphasis, and narrative pacing. Furthermore, research in visual language and narratology supports this approach. Studies, such as Jain and others (2012), show that artistic techniques such as colour, framing, and layout direct and sustain attention in ways that align with the dynamics of gazing.<sup>195</sup> They conclude that '[a]rtistic intent is encoded in the eye movements of viewers looking at comic art,' echoing Massironi's earlier findings on the psychology of visual guidance.<sup>196</sup> Similarly, Carl Potts describes comic creation as a process of reduction, encapsulation, and juxtaposition, in which artists deliberately manipulate readers' attention through suspension, emphasis, pacing, and scene selection. These insights confirm that comic artists' choices and techniques are effective indicators of the gaze.

For these reasons, this dissertation proposes to analyse the gaze through textual evidence rather than through profiling audiences or assuming a uniform male readership. Such an approach acknowledges the growing diversity of both comic creators and audiences while avoiding reductive assumptions about reader response. Instead, by drawing on comic art and visual narrative theories, the study examines how specific combinations of verbal and visual elements convey masculinity and establish authority. In a nutshell, the research design is as such:

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<sup>193</sup> Official Press Release, 'DC ENTERTAINMENT ANNOUNCES NEW BOOKS, NEW CREATORS, BROADER FOCUS FOR THE DC UNIVERSE', *DC*, 6 February 2015.

<sup>194</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>195</sup> Eakta Jain, Yaser Sheikh, and Jessica Hodgins, 'Inferring Artistic Intention in Comic Art through Viewer Gaze', *Proceedings of the ACM Symposium on Applied Perception*, 3 August 2012, pp. 55–62, doi:[10.1145/2338676.2338688](https://doi.org/10.1145/2338676.2338688).

<sup>196</sup> Jain and others, "Inferring Artistic Intention in Comic Art", p. 56; Manfredo Massironi and translated by N. Bruno, *The Psychology of Graphic Images: Seeing, Drawing, Communicating* (New York: Psychology Press, 2001), doi:[10.4324/9781410601896](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410601896).

Information and rhetoric + narrative progress and perspective → gaze → power → gender norms

In this process, the circulation of gaze between characters and readers is analysed by examining how interactions among characters may elicit identification or objectification and whether the pleasure of looking relates to sex-relevant desires. Then, the gaze determines the presence of power imbalances and the ways in which these dynamics are conveyed.

### 2.2.1 Gaze Analysis Based on Multimodal Text Analysis

Textual analysis of gaze consists of two aspects: the comic language, which means informative messages delivered by consecutive text/images; and the comic narrative, referring to the overall narrative structure and perspective that delivers the message. On the other hand, the sites of generating such meaning-making and narratives are divided into ‘within panels’ and ‘across panels’. Within panels, a comic panel usually contains visual elements with or without verbal texts and intermediate forms of devices that combine characteristics of both modalities. For example, a graphic text delivers information both via its verbal content and the visual form. Across panels, a series of juxtaposed panels can deliver information beyond individual panels’ content, expand space and time in static images, and form a narrative pace and perspective.

Current categorisations for systematically reading comics vary. In ‘On the Language of Comics and the Reading Process’, Mila Bongco divides the comic language into five aspects: texts and text stylisation, panels, gutters (the gaps between panels), time and duration, and narration.<sup>197</sup> Bongco’s division builds on the units in comics, in other words, what is presented within a panel. Content-wise, Chris Gavalier proposes to focus on panel layouts, framings and compositions, transitions between juxtaposed panels (‘juxtapositional closure’), the connection of multiple panels (‘page sentencing’), text-image interactions, and stylisation (‘representational abstraction’).<sup>198</sup> Similarly, Silke Horstkotte lists the meaning-making elements as ‘[p]anel size, shape, and placement, drawing style, coloring, and the use of frames, as well as the use or lack of narrative text boxes, their size, shape, color, and

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<sup>197</sup> Bongco, *Reading Comics*, pp. 45-84.

<sup>198</sup> Chris Gavalier, *Superhero Comics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), pp. 205-243.

position in or outside panels'.<sup>199</sup> Combining their lists, the discussions in this thesis will closely examine the following elements:

1. Within panels:
  - Textual texts: content, presentation (formatting, fonts, speech balloons and boxes)
  - Images: content, stylisation, colouring, composition, graphic perspectives
  - Multimodality: graphic texts, text-image interactions
2. Across panels:
  - Framing: panel boxes, gutters
  - Layout: positions, sizes and the density within a page
  - Narration: duration, panel transitions, panel sentencing, narrative perspectives

The following sections introduce the references used to analyse each element, organised by the source of the frameworks. Firstly, comic studies provide essential rationale to examine meaning interpretation, multimodal interaction, layout and narration; Secondly, comic practice conventions can support analysis of intentional decisions of creating or blocking gazes by identifying art techniques in different roles of comic production. Finally, how the framework processes the site within/across panels) and aspect (information/narrative) will be explained in the last section of this chapter.

### 2.2.1.1 *Capturing gazes in comic studies*

The first section of the analytical framework is composed of comic study theories to provide systematic references for describing linguistic and narrative features in comics, which tend to be less theorised or even overlooked in comic practices. Firstly, interpretation means to describe the denotation of a verbal line or an illustration. As all the case examples are written in English, comprehending verbal texts is relatively straightforward. In comparison, interpreting images needs more of a rationale, as, in comics, the status of graphemes, meaning the smallest meaning-making units of an image, remains a subject of debate. In 'A Visual Lexicon', Neil Cohn argues that the entire panel should be read as a whole in visual linguistics — 'an attention unit', as Cohn phrases, which is further reinforced in his later

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<sup>199</sup> Silke Horstkotte, 'Zooming In and Out: Panels, Frames, Sequences, and the Building of Graphic Storyworlds.', in *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, ed. by Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 27–48.

monograph *The Visual Language of Comics* (2013).<sup>200</sup> In ‘A Multimodal Language Faculty’ (2024), Cohn and Schilperoord propose a comprehensive model to describe the meaning-making process within an item that has multimodal functions or elements, such as an icon (a combination of an image and a symbol) or a poster (containing both words and images).<sup>201</sup> The former framework does not offer methods of interpretation for items within a panel, while the latter describes, rather than regulates, the natural cognitive process for texts and images. Thus, understanding the literal meaning of verbal and visual items largely reflects my reading and descriptions. To minimise arbitrariness, the source texts and images will be presented for examination.

Multimodal interaction refers to how the meaning in texts and images collaborate, which can potentially modify the literal meaning of individual verbal or graphic items and thus manipulate the focus or emphasis in panels. Rik Spanjers believes that text-image relations are fluid and context-dependent,<sup>202</sup> yet it is generally agreed that comics’ meaning-making does not hold validity unless both texts and images are present. As John A. Bateman observes, ‘word and image will always present something new with respect to the other simply by virtue of their differing expressive capabilities’.<sup>203</sup> To address the importance of text/image collaboration, Will Eisner differentiates the function of visual elements based on whether they repeat or expand the textual texts, and Scott McCloud’s more detailed categorisation of text/image relations in comics also explores the messages in verbal and visual texts, listing the types of collaborations and potential discrepancies as follows:<sup>204</sup>

1. Word-specific: texts carry meaning-making solely, and images do not expand the message
2. Image-specific: images carry meaning-making solely, and texts do not expand the message

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<sup>200</sup> Neil Cohn, ‘A Visual Lexicon’, *The Public Journal of Semiotics*, 1.1 (2007), pp. 35–56; Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. (London: A&C Black, 2013), pp. 56-64, 70-78.

<sup>201</sup> Neil Cohn and Joost Schilperoord, *A Multimodal Language Faculty: A Cognitive Framework for Human Communication* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).

<sup>202</sup> Rik Spanjers, ‘Text-Image Relations’, in *Handbook of Comics and Graphic Narratives*, ed. by Sebastian Domsch, Dan Hassler-Forest, and Dirk Vanderbeke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 81–98, doi:[10.1515/9783110446968](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110446968).

<sup>203</sup> John A. Bateman, ‘Visual Narrative: Comics and Sequential Art’, in *Text and Image* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 91–115, p. 99.

<sup>204</sup> Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*, The Will Eisner Library (New York, N.Y. ; London: W.W. Norton, 2008), p. 132; McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 153-55.

3. Duo-specific: texts and images carry exactly the same meaning
4. Additive: either texts or images amplify or elaborate on another's message
5. Parallel: texts and images express different meanings without intersection
6. Montage: texts as 'integral graphic parts' of the entire picture
7. Inter-dependent: texts and images deliver messages collectively, and the meaning changes when either of them is taken out

Developing on Eisner and McCloud's theory, Chris Gavalari also proposes to describe text-image relations by their meaning and adds 'image-only visual' and 'word-only text' to cover panels that only contain images or words.<sup>205</sup> Interestingly, this approach of categorisation tends to only function as a descriptive label for some categories. For example, 'word-specific', 'image-specific', 'duo-specific' and 'parallel' only suggest whether texts or images are the primary meaning-making devices. However, 'additive' implies the effects of multimodality, including amplification and expansion, and 'montage' implies the graphic potential in certain texts. Thus, to further explore the influence of text/image collaboration, most of McCloud's message-based categorisations can specify the devices for analysis, yet they are insufficient to support the influence of such devices.

On the other hand, Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* does not focus on exploring 'how' but 'what' in the information delivery of texts in comics. Groensteen identifies seven influences of texts on images: 'the effect of the real, dramatisation, anchorage, relay, suture, control, and rhythm'.<sup>206</sup> The effect of the real, dramatisation, and rhythm control the storytelling, respectively referring to the diegetic reality, (e.g. dialogues), emphasis and amplification, (e.g. onomatopoeia), and the volume of texts that slows down or speeds up the reading pace.<sup>207</sup> Anchorage, relay, suture, and control highlight the informative function of texts, meaning that texts can specify and clear the ambiguity in images, provide additional information, create transitions between panels and control the temporal shifts.<sup>208</sup> This categorisation overlaps with 'additive' in McCloud's categories, but provides a clearer reference for what effect texts can achieve when combined with images, which helps to

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<sup>205</sup> Gavalari, *Superhero Comics*, pp. 229-30.

<sup>206</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 134.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131-32.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

identify the narrative focus in a panel's verbal-visual presentation and discuss the presence or absence of gaze.

Finally, layout and narration analysis across panels offers a way to link the structural design of a comic page with the unfolding of its story. Both dimensions are crucial, since the arrangement of panel shapes how readers navigate a page, while the narrative categories reveal how each panel contributes to the overall arc. To describe panels' relative positions, sizes and segmentations in a frame, Groensteen describes the spatial relations among panels as spatio-topia, which examines panel layouts from three parameters: form (a panel's shape and outline), area (a panel's relative size) and site (the location of a panel).<sup>209</sup> This division theorises the key characteristics of layout designs, which help to identify how a layout guides gazes not only by reading sequence, but also by arrangement in shape, size and placement. Then, *Visual Language of Comics* by Cohn breaks down the construction of narration in multiple panels.<sup>210</sup> For the juxtaposition of panels and their narrative functions, Cohn develops visual language grammar based on Propp's narratology theory and categorises a panel's function in a narrative arc as Orienters (environment and context), Establishers (beginning), Initials (development), Prolongations (accumulation), Peaks (conflict), Releases (resolution), and additional refiners that function as adjectives for the first six categories.<sup>211</sup> This categorisation can identify the formation and duration of gaze in a narration and helps to analyse its influence on storytelling and the potential implications of stance and power. Then, the analysis of narrative perspective can further discuss the types of gazes in such narrations. In his journal article, 'The Monstrator, the Recitant and the Shadow of the Narrator', Groensteen identifies layered narration perspectives in comics as the narrator (the story-controller, sometimes a character but usually the invisible writer), the recitant (the visual perspective), and the monstrator (the verbal narrator).<sup>212</sup> By comparing the audience and readers' perceptions of narrative perspectives in comics and cinema, Groensteen synthesises different tendencies of using certain angles to present a visual

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<sup>209</sup> Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, p. 25.

<sup>210</sup> Neil Cohn, 'Visual Narrative Structure', *Cognitive Science*, 37.3 (2013), pp. 413–52, doi:[10.1111/cogs.12016](https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12016); Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*, pp. 70-78.

<sup>211</sup> Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*, pp. 77-86.

<sup>212</sup> Thierry Groensteen, 'The Monstrator, the Recitant, and the Shadow of the Narrator', *European Comic Art*, 3.1 (2010), 1–21; also see Thierry Groensteen and Ann Miller, *Comics and Narration* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 79-86; Thierry Groensteen, 'The Monstrator, the Recitant, and the Shadow of the Narrator', *European Comic Art*, 3.1 (2010), 1–21.

narration in both types of texts.<sup>213</sup> These analytical points highlight how page design and narrative structuring operate in tandem, allowing for a more precise discussion of how readers' gazes are orchestrated across sequences. In other words, they examine not only what is shown, but also how it is shown.

### 2.2.1.2 Capturing gazes in comic practices

All other elements, such as fonts, colours and the application of graphic texts, are more realistically described by comic conventions and practice guidelines. In comic studies, corpora of conventional usages of elements have been developed in multiple monographs about narratives in sequential arts. For example, Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* concludes the meaning of panel borders, (e.g. wavy or scalloped edges indicating the past time), and McCloud's *Understanding Comics* maps out the emotional and empathetic relevance in the lettering decisions of fonts, sizes and formatting.<sup>214</sup> Complementary to scholarly synthesis, guidebooks for comic production can also provide valuable insight, targeting specifically the artistic aspects in comics, especially as DC Comics has published a full list of guidebooks about each working stage of producing comics.<sup>215</sup> DC's official tutorial series provides essential contexts on illustration, graphic design and other art techniques specific to superhero comics, emphasising the artistic aspects of comics that cannot be fully described by the narrative or linguistic approaches and have been 'sitting awkwardly on the comics theory shelf',<sup>216</sup> as Benoît Crucifix sharply comments.

The knowledge of individual work stages helps examine the consistency of a certain artistic decision throughout the creative process, which provides circumstantial support to the argument about the significance of such a decision. In the case-studies where the source materials or artists are prestigious, it is likely that the relevant issues have been republished

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<sup>213</sup> Groensteen, 'The Monstrator, the Recitant, and the Shadow of the Narrator', pp. 4-6, 16-18.

<sup>214</sup> Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, pp. 38-99; McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 134.

<sup>215</sup> Dennis O'Neil, *The DC Comics Guide to Writing Comics* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2001); Klaus Janson, *The DC Comics Guide to Pencilling Comics* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2002); Klaus Janson, *The DC Comics Guide to Inking Comics* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2003); Freddie E. Williams II, *The DC Comics Guide to Digitally Drawing Comics* (Potter/Ten Speed/Harmony/Rodale, 2013); Carl Potts, *The DC Comics Guide to Creating Comics: Inside the Art of Visual Storytelling* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2013); Mark Chiarello and Todd Klein, *The DC Comics Guide to Coloring and Lettering Comics* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2004).

<sup>216</sup> Benoît Crucifix, 'Drawing, Redrawing, and Undrawing', in Benoît Crucifix, *The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies*, ed. by Frederick Luis Aldama (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 147-62, p. 150, doi:[10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190917944.013.40](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190917944.013.40).

multiple times or included in art collections with demonstrations of inspirational sketches, drafts, intermediate artworks and revision tracks. Although it is not entirely possible to acquire backstage materials for all case-studies, especially the very early issues, examining the workflow when applicable still provides valuable insights from the perspective of production and helps to pinpoint the effect of an element more accurately. Rather than providing a practical drawing guide, this section will introduce the comic production process and how each stage relates to the convention-based analytical points, i.e., all elements listed in Section 2.2.2 except for previously discussed content interpretation, text/image relations, layout and narration.

In *Making Comics*, McCloud outlines the creation of comic panels from an analytical perspective, starting with conceptual designs such as perspectives and eye-guiding tracks.<sup>217</sup> However, commercial comics production in the USA usually has a more strategic division of labour that defines comics creation as a streamlined collection of visual-verbal elements starting from narrative scripts and ending in colours. In DC Comics, a typical workflow includes distinct stages carried out by specialised roles, mainly including script writers, pencillers, inkers, colourists, letterers, and, of course, editors. Most commonly, the sequence of progressive production is as follows: scripts, roughs, pencil pages, wireframes, ink pages, colours. Lettering can be either after the roughs or the inks.

To elaborate further, writers decide on a script about not only the story, but also what happens on each page and work with pencilers to create layout guides called roughs. Then, the pencillers convert the textual descriptions of each panel in roughs into well-defined sketches, also known as pencil pages. After that, letterers add all the dialogues and other verbal elements, and inkers use (traditionally) black ink to render the outlines and shadows into solid black-and-white images, respectively known as wireframes and inks. Finally, colourists overlay colours on the inked pages with additional information such as the transition of lighting or textures. After the digital art revolution in the industry in the 1980s, norms of modern comics' workflow have become more diversified and flexible and have derived several established new flows such as all-digital workflow, pencil hybrid workflow and ink hybrid workflow.<sup>218</sup> As the self-explanatory terms suggest, the new flows allow

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<sup>217</sup> Scott McCloud, *Making Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), pp. 22-33.

<sup>218</sup> Freddie E. Williams II, *The DC Comics Guide to Digitally Drawing Comics* (New York: Potter/Ten Speed/Harmony/Rodale, 2013), pp. 32-45, 110-117.

artists of a specific specialisation to work on paper-based materials with additional conversion steps, accommodating the needs of both traditional and digital artists. Knowledge of a general work sequence is key to understanding the collaborative effect within a visual or verbal presentation. For example, a visual centre with a strong shadow-light contrast and detailed textures is likely influenced by both ink and colour techniques, which avoid umbrella descriptions or mistakenly attributing the effect of colours to lining works. As editorial work tends to be indirect in textual analysis, the exact duties of editors will not be elaborated on, although their contributions will be addressed.

The first stage is script writing and pencilling. Narrative perspectives, layouts, pacing, or in plain words, how a comic is structurally presented in readers' eyes, rely most heavily on the collaboration of the writers and pencillers. Comic writers are the initial content producers in a team of comic artists who compose the narrative arc with a verbal script by deciding on the plot and a blueprint of its possible presentation. In Dennis O'Neil's explanatory guide, script-writing can be either 'plot-first' or 'full-script', meaning that writers either write a short overview of the key events in one story arc in a prose-like format and collaborate with pencillers to segment them into panels with polished dialogues, or they choose to independently produce a stage-style script with imagery descriptions of panel contents and transcripts for lines and captions.<sup>219</sup> Either way, '[a] script needs to tell an artist what the story is and what he or she is supposed to draw from page to page in the comic.'<sup>220</sup> A writer's job is to produce textual manuscript pages that will be converted into text-image pages ('story pages' or simply 'pages') in the collaborative work on visual art. In other words, they are responsible, at least partially, for making the primary decision of planning, dividing and allocating a narrative arc into individual pages and sometimes also into separate panels, although the exact content could be revised in later stages for more appropriate visual presentation. Many of the verbal elements examined in the following gaze analysis originate from the writers' creative input, such as characterisation, plot design, narrative structures, and so on.

Even if the role of writers appears to only require writing ability for textual texts, they tend to have a certain level of visual art skills, frequently working also as pencillers, to achieve

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<sup>219</sup> O'Neil, *The DC Comics Guide to Writing Comics*, p. 47.

<sup>220</sup> Mark Kneece, *The Art of Comic Book Writing: The Definitive Guide to Outlining, Scripting, and Pitching Your Sequential Art Stories* (Nottingham: Clarkson Potter/Ten Speed, 2015), p. 31.

more realistic arrangements of visual elements.<sup>221</sup> When writers approach stories mostly from a verbal perspective, pencillers are the primary visual content providers. As the first batch of comic painters in the production team, pencillers produce a sketch version of the story pages based on the verbal script, which is traditionally drawn with pencils or other erasable materials — hence the name. The pencil pages usually contain clear lines and a provisional division of light and solid shadows (marked as ‘x’, as in the ‘Hush’ example in Section 3.2.1), which will be the raw material for the following inking work. Pencillers are in control of the most explicitly visible part in gaze analysis, including characters’ appearances and clothing, environment setting and depth, compositions within panels, and the sequence and spatial arrangement within frames.<sup>222</sup> Pencillers also decide the linear perspectives of an image, which is a visual technique to create the illusion of depth and space, relying on the visual phenomenon that parallel lines appear to converge as they recede into the distance, eventually meeting at one or more vanishing points on the horizon line.<sup>223</sup> Thus, when analysing how forms, shapes and locations contribute to creating contrasts and visual gravities and guiding readers’ attention with intentional paces and time durations, it is important to refer to the decisions made during the pencilling process.

Inking and colouring are the two stages that finalise the rendering of images, collectively deciding the density and presentation of visual details, such as volumes, textures, lighting, and even, to a large extent, the overall art style. Taking on from the (usually) grey pencil pages, inkers solidify the lines into black wireframes and apply monochromatic shadows to the dark areas to create the illusion of material textures in partially lit surfaces, along with a harsh division of highlight and core shadows. The origin of this role, which appears to be merely a technical, repetitive transcription of the pencilers’ production, was the requirement of clear, reproducible black lines for large-scale printing in newspapers starting from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>224</sup> With the significant advancement in printing resolution and sharpness for modern comics, apart from maintaining clarity, inkers have much more creative freedom in experimenting with different tools and exploring the possible influence of their work.<sup>225</sup> In

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<sup>221</sup> O’Neil, *The DC Comics Guide to Writing Comics*, p. 23.

<sup>222</sup> See Janson, *The DC Comics Guide to Pencilling Comics*, Part One to Part Three for examples.

<sup>223</sup> Christian Leborg, *Visual Grammar* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), p. 93.

<sup>224</sup> Janson, *The DC Comics Guide to Inking Comics*, Part Two, Section Four.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

hand drawing, inkwork is achieved with pens or brushes with India ink.<sup>226</sup> By changing drawing tools such as nibs for dip pens, sizes for fineliners, or brush types for soft brushes, inkers can realise a large variation in line textures, weights and densities, which is even more flexible with digital brushes in computer inking. Additionally, the shapes and lengths of lines are used to deliver information, such as feathering a blurred shadow, differentiating foreground and background, rendering a rough or silky surface, or strengthening the dynamic in an item's volume or movement. In visual analysis, inkwork is mainly relevant to the visual guidance in the rhythm of blackened areas, including main contrasts, stylisation and lighting designs.

Colouring refers to applying colours to the inked pages, making black-and-white illustrations into full-colour visual presentations commonly seen in USA comics. In early comics, the limitation in the availability of hand-drawing paints and printing technologies restricted the range of hues and values to 63 colours (and 124 colours after the 1970s) for paints and 4 basic dyes, including yellow, magenta, cyan and black, for printing.<sup>227</sup> The highly restricted colour palette, plus the usually snug space on newspapers for comic strips or in the crowded panel layouts in periodical comics, resulted in iconised colour usage that was intended to invoke recognition rather than to serve narrative functions or raise aesthetic value. This is also the reason for less straightforward colour rendering, such as using cobalt blue to represent black hair, and for explosive contrast in superhero costumes — even Batman, the Dark Knight, must have an alarmingly yellow utility belt (and sometimes a yellow bat logo too) as a distinguishable trait. The case-study of Batman Vol 1 #29 (1945) in Section 4.1.1, as the earliest case in this dissertation, provides a good example of how Robin's blue-black hair and uniform with intensely contrasting colours of saturated red, yellow and green are immune to environmental elements such as water and lighting. The fixed, almost rigid, application of colours makes it of very little point to discuss the narrative and characterising functions of colouring in early comic productions. As Jim Steranko claims, early comics'

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<sup>226</sup> In US commercial comics, solid black (slightly less commonly, grey-scale) inking has been, and likely continues to be, the mainstream option for the wireframes and shadows as a classic stylistic feature. DC Comics has an ongoing publication project of the 'Noir Editions', which are assemblies of uncoloured ink pages for influential periodical issues. However, digital drawing has made it extremely convenient to change the colour of lines partially or fully to create a dazzling effect for intensely coloured light sources, such as explosions and auras, and colourists also use full chromatic lines in rendering.

<sup>227</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 185-188; Chiarello and Klein, *The DC Comics Guide to Coloring and Lettering Comics*, pp. 12-13.

colour choices could be a mere craftsmanship hastily done by printers rather than artists,<sup>228</sup> so the influence of colours on the overall narrative is arguably limited.

However, for latter comics with intentional creativity in colour choices and techniques, the analysis of colouring work is as crucial as other visual elements such as composition and perspective. After the 1980s, the rise of digital colouring gave comic artists significantly higher freedom in choosing both which colours to use, and what information or emotion to express with them, making colours ‘become an equal element in comics’ artistic equation’.<sup>229</sup> The advancement of digital colouring software also makes it possible to add filters in the colouring stage, such as lens blur, special effects and glowing highlights — in Section 5.3, the starlight effect is created in such a way. In DC Comics’ colouring tutorial, artistic stylisation of colour choices is specifically emphasised in its value of creating visual illusions, such as depth and focus, and enticing associative impressions and emotional responses, which extends beyond the basic principles of creating an image of professional quality.<sup>230</sup> Although Steranko pinpoints the timestamp of the revolution of digital colouring in the exact year of 1985,<sup>231</sup> in comics published in the 1980s, the contribution of colouring to constructing narratives has already become noticeable. For example, in the example in Section 5.4, the contrast of colour temperatures repeats the verbal texts’ expressions about coldness and warmth. Knowing when and which colours are intentional artistic choices helps to analyse their guiding effects and implications in relation to verbal texts.

Finally, lettering is the process of adding verbal words and relevant elements, which is usually done after pencilling for hand lettering and after inking for digital lettering.<sup>232</sup> Apart from creating clean, readable texts, a letterer’s job typically includes using different fonts, (e.g. the notorious Comic Sans),<sup>233</sup> and type styles, (e.g. italic and bold) to identify different

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<sup>228</sup> Jim Steranko, ‘Introduction’, in *The DC Comics Guide to Coloring and Lettering Comics* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2004), pp. 8–10.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid..

<sup>230</sup> Chiarello and Klein, *The DC Comics Guide to Coloring and Lettering Comics*, pp. 15-37.

<sup>231</sup> Steranko, ‘Introduction’, p. 9.

<sup>232</sup> Chiarello and Klein, *The DC Comics Guide to Coloring and Lettering Comics*, p. 84.

<sup>233</sup> For most of the examples in this dissertation, the font choice, which follows the default norm of superhero comics, is Comic Sans, with only very nuanced differences in letterers’ styles, nib choices and whether it is computer or hand lettering. Hence, Comic Sans as a font itself is not elaborated in discussions as a unique trait unless necessary. For more information about this extremely influential comic lettering font and its variant, see *Comic Sans: The Biography of a Typeface*; Simon Garfield, *Comic Sans: The Biography of a Typeface (The ABC of Fonts Series)* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024).

characters, express tones and intonations, and emphasise highlighted information. They also contribute to the graphic aspects of letters, such as outlining speech bubbles and dialogue boxes, and creating special typefaces for graphic texts — the short words or phrases embedded in the images as a part of the visuals, and highly stylised or decorative typefaces that have an image-like presentation. Letterers usually also work on outlining panel borders and adding page numbers. Compared to more visually identifiable specialities, the effort of lettering is less noticeable but is essential to how time, voices and perspectives are expressed with type styles, boxes and other typographic elements.

## 2.2.2 Materials and the Selection of Case-studies

Created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in 1939 and owned by DC Comics, Batman is one of the most well-known superhero characters, known for his crime-fighting career in Gotham, a fictional city in the comic universe of DC Comics. Batman is commonly known as the alias of Bruce Wayne, who is the wealthy heir of Gotham City and adopts the masked identity of a bat-inspired vigilante after his parents' murder. Batman has many known allies and family members, such as six Robins as his sidekicks, Alfred Pennyworth as his butler, and Superman and Wonder Woman as peer superheroes in the Justice League; he also has a colourful rogue gallery of supervillains, including the Joker, Bane, the KGBeast and many more. In this thesis, Batman is examined both as a classic superhero icon in his own right and within the dynamics of several supporting characters. This section outlines the rationale for choosing Batman as research material, specifying how the research processes variations and versions of Batman, and explaining the comic periodisation to contextualise the general background of the case-studies.

### 2.2.3.1 *Why Batman?*

Among the dominant publishers of the American comic industry, DC Comics has played a central role in this development, generating an extensive corpus of periodicals, graphic novels, films, and transmedia products. As DC Comics' pillar franchise, Batman comics provide a particularly significant and layered reading of normative masculinity in superhero culture. Despite being the earliest examples of male superheroes, Batman features many main characteristics of the archetype of superhero characters, such as secret identities, costumes and justice-seeking missions, which remain relevant to the genre and still play an important role as pillar characters of the comic industry. Since Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), the character has further shaped the tone of the modern superhero,

with critics observing that ‘the wings of the Dark Knight are spread impressively wide, and that shadow extends further than that of any other hero into the consciousness of the 21st century.’<sup>234</sup> Will Brooker’s observation on *The Dark Knight Returns* well illustrates how Batman’s cultural influence is not limited to a celebrated characterisation but radiates across the entire industry:

*Miller’s rewriting of Batman, despite its apparently lantern-jawed heterosexuality, effectively enabled Vertigo as a space for creators like Morrison, Milligan, and Gaiman to play with other superhero characters, and that play frequently embraced gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual identities. This separate area within DC, with its ‘for mature readers’ label on the cover of each title, became a space for surprisingly queer adventures and heroes.*<sup>235</sup>

Unlike Superman, who epitomises the superpowered archetype with biological superiority, Batman embodies the foundational type of the non-superpowered hero, defined by relentless striving to become extraordinary.<sup>236</sup> His dual identity as Bruce Wayne and Batman represents one of the most iconic personas in the superhero canon, and his influence extends across media and cultural discourse. Without supernatural abilities, but instead grounded in a tragic origin story, Batman is celebrated not as an untouchable deity like, for instance, many of the 21st-century cinematic iterations of Superman, but as a figure who invites readers’ self-projection, which makes him more complicated than the common simplification of ‘pre-eminently upper-class white man championing the status quo’.<sup>237</sup> This combination of cultural centrality, symbolic flexibility, and perceived relatability makes Batman an especially productive subject for interrogating how normative masculinity is represented, reinforced, and contested in popular culture.

### 2.2.3.2 Which Batman?

Contrary to what a casual or occasional superhero reader would assume, deciding which Batman to study is surprisingly complicated. As a superhero codename, ‘Batman’ usually refers to Bruce Wayne, but beyond this (presumably) common knowledge, several other

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<sup>234</sup> Brown, *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity*, p. 23; Laurence Maslon and Michael Kantor, *Superheroes!: Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2013).

<sup>235</sup> Brooker, ‘The Best Batman Story’, p. 43.

<sup>236</sup> Jeffrey K. Johnson, *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012); Coogan, 2006, p. 200.

<sup>237</sup> Chris Gavalier, ‘The Well-Born Superhero’, *The Journal of American Culture*, 37.2 (2014), pp. 182–97, doi:[10.1111/jacc.12162](https://doi.org/10.1111/jacc.12162).

characters, who are mainly from the ‘Bat-family’ — vigilantes closely related to Bruce Wayne in his crime-fighting career, also have assumed tenures of the Batman identity (see Section 2.2.3.2 and 5.1 for representational Batman alternatives). To disambiguate Batman for this thesis, all the cases are centred on Bruce Wayne’s Batman for representativeness.

In terms of versions, Batman as research material poses another challenge for his multiple iterations across time and fictional universes. For a long-run publisher like DC Comics, character development tends to be an enrichment with new elements rather than a linear scheme in which a character grows and cannot be ‘ungrown’. As Georg Drennig observes, Batman’s character images vary significantly over their publication history and across versions, becoming ‘a fragmented textual existence over the years, including changes in character history and physical appearance’, which mostly results from the industrial mode of collaboration.<sup>238</sup> At the same time, relevant production teams also tend to invest considerable editorial effort and legal measures to maintain a stable continuity within the fictional world, allowing ‘flexibility to accommodate some of the most divergent expressions’ in an enduring, relatively self-coherent narrative.<sup>239</sup> This type of connotation expansion moves beyond chronological storytelling and organises a superhero’s cultural image as a continuity: ‘[c]omic book continuity refers to character consistency, interrelated books, and cumulative events’.<sup>240</sup> A character’s continuity maps out their anchors, such as appearance, characteristics, histories, relationships and power dynamics. The complexity of established characterisation supports the continuation of relevant fictional elements across pages, texts and franchises with a general coherence and generates expectations and predictions for further explorations.<sup>241</sup> Thus, while much of this scholarship is periodical in scope, this thesis’s approach treats Batman comics as equally accessible across time, reading them without the restriction of chronological order to better trace recurring dynamics and meanings.

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<sup>238</sup> Georg Drennig, ‘Otherness and the European as Villain and Antihero in American Comics’, in *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives*, ed. by Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), pp. 127–39, p. 128.

<sup>239</sup> William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, ‘I’m Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise’, in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 182–213, pp. 190–93.

<sup>240</sup> Liam P. Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood’s Leading Genre* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), p. 19.

<sup>241</sup> Dennis O’Neil, *The DC Comics Guide to Writing Comics*, pp. 153–159; Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), p. 38–52.

By far, focused analysis of comics of a limited period, such as a decade or an era, has provided valuable insights into their interactions with social factors specific to that time. Periodical comics' quick response to the changes in their historical era and their vast readership make the research on chronological sequence highly significant to explore the cultural relevance unique to a specific historical background. However, in contemporary comic culture, a superhero's character image is also understood as a relatively stable collection of various interpretations from the historical context of each era, which is both a result of collective production and intertextual perception among comic series and between comics and other media. As the copyright of most classic superheroes, including Batman, is owned by their publishers rather than individual artists, comic continuities have become a mainstream production tool that utilises past writings, connects different franchises and engages creators to provide unique content for a unified cultural product.<sup>242</sup> From the perspective of comic production, Batman as a continuity, rather than as a version of this character singled out from a specific title, addresses the long-lasting influence of past comics and the interactions among different series.

In this way, basing Batman's development on continuity rather than chronology allows historical iterations to remain relevant and be revisited in future stories without conflict with current ongoing writings. As Paweł Miszuk comments, '[t]he importance of continuity for comic books then is that it allows the creators a great degree of creative freedom while putting relatively few restrictions on them in the process.'<sup>243</sup> For example, *Batman '66* (2013-16) develops the *Batman* TV series (1966-68) starring Adam West as Batman and Burt Ward as Robin, continuing the camp and comedy themes of the TV series.<sup>244</sup> As a recurrence of an iteration in the Batman continuity, this whimsical version of Bruce Wayne does not interfere with the seriousness and dramatic intensity in main story arcs and crossover events of major titles, for example, the 'The Joker: Death in the Family' arc (2013),

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<sup>242</sup> Ezra Claverie, *Copyright Vigilantes: Intellectual Property and the Hollywood Superhero* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2024), pp. 17-19; Molly Hatcher, 'The Dark Knight under Revision', *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics*, 4.2 (2013), pp. 257-77, doi:[10.1080/21504857.2012.656135](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2012.656135); William Proctor, 'Beginning Again: The Reboot Phenomenon in Comic Books and Film', *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture*, 9.1 (2012).

<sup>243</sup> Paweł Miszuk, 'On Continuity in Comic Book Film Adaptations and Beyond', *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, 16.3 (2023), pp. 213-31, doi:[10.1386/jafp\\_00100\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jafp_00100_1), p. 218.

<sup>244</sup> Jeff Parker and Jonathan Case, *Batman '66* (New York: DC Comics, 2013), i.

the ‘Zero Year’ arc and tie-ins (2013-14) and the ‘Robin War’ arc (2016).<sup>245</sup> Seeing a superhero as a continuity transcends the limitation of a specific issue, event or even historical period, allowing flexibility in interpretation and tolerance in potentially contradictory aspects of a character.

With regard to the consumption of comic products, readers also accept the co-existence of a superhero’s different interpretations as compositions of a stable umbrella image because of intertextuality within a character’s continuity. For comic book readers, the accessibility of past issues has been significantly changed by the digitisation of the comic industry.<sup>246</sup> How a character is viewed by comic readers is no longer limited to what is presently circulating from the retailers. Rather, the legacy of the publications in the last centuries is still considered a key contributor to a character’s image and thus holds cultural relevance today. Moreover, readers have become familiar with intertextual references with their knowledge of a superhero as ‘a databank of complex, interconnected, and retrievable chunks of information’, which also contributes to the reinforcement and revision of a superhero’s continuity.<sup>247</sup> Federico Pagello also notices the convergence of different versions of the same character in his examination of superhero origins:

*[A]lthough some consumers’ experience of the property might be limited to a single iteration, or they consider one text to be more definitive than the others, most will have inevitably come into contact with multiple manifestations and thus, inescapably, the perception of pre-existing texts has some bearing on each new instalment. The easy accessibility of older content in the contemporary mediascape via digital archives makes intertextuality a standard-issue component of franchise perception.<sup>248</sup>*

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<sup>245</sup> Scott Snyder and others, *The Joker: Death in the Family* (New York: DC Comics, 2013); Scott Snyder and Greg Capullo, *Batman: Zero Year* (New York: DC Comics, 2013-14); Tom King and others, *Robin War* (New York: DC Comics, 2016).

<sup>246</sup> Federico Pagello, ‘The “Origin Story” is the Only Story: Seriality and Temporality in Superhero Fiction from Comics to Post-Television’, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 34.5–8 (2017), pp. 725–45, doi:[10.1080/10509208.2017.1347864](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2017.1347864).

<sup>247</sup> Scott Jeffery, ‘Difference, Repetition and the Superhero Comic’, in *Superheroes and Excess: A Philosophical Adventure*, ed. by Jamie Brassett and Richard Reynolds, 1st edn (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 141–61, doi:[10.4324/9780203730065](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203730065); Joan Ormrod, ‘Too Many Wonder Womans: Constraining and/or in the DC Extended Universe’, in *Superheroes and Excess* (London: Routledge, 2021); Angela Ndalians, ‘Enter the Aleph: Superhero Worlds and Hypertime Realities’, in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, ed. by Angela Ndalians (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 270–90, doi:[10.4324/9780203873090](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203873090).

<sup>248</sup> Justin Mack, ‘The Dark Knight Levels Up: Batman: Arkham Asylum and the Convergent Superhero Franchise’, in *Superhero Synergies: Comic Book Characters Go Digital*, ed. by James N. Gilmore and Matthias Stork (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 2014), pp. 177–200, p. 180.

As readers interweave stories and iterations into a unified character image, the collaboration creates what Robert Stam refers to as an ‘ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin’.<sup>249</sup> The intertextual reception of a long-running comic book character makes it valid to approach them as an entirety with internal conflicts and links rather than individual characters separated by iterations.

Finally, the perception of a superhero’s image extends beyond the influence of comic book readings alone. Rather, their character continuities also interact with versions in other media, such as films or television series, as, in addition to comics, readers also collectively incorporate their understandings generated from derivative cultural products into their views of a character. For example, Miszuk observes that MCU develops a transmedia narrative continuity that breaks down the hierarchy of the source comic books and adapted films, which establishes a mature commercial model soon imitated by other studios’ franchises such as the DC Extended Universe (DCEU).<sup>250</sup> Although the DCEU diegetically is separated in TV series and comics, readers and audiences are nonetheless encouraged to connect their experiences of various versions to create what Miszuk referred to as ‘corporate synergy’, a transmedia continuity where elements of the same character collaborate across multiple media and modalities to systematically build a narrative of an integral image.<sup>251</sup> In other words, a superhero is not defined by their comic book, film or video game presences respectively but is perceived as a self-contained system that arches over all these representations. This collaboration among the media is well illustrated by the Arkhamverse, which is a stand-alone limited series of Batman stories that started from the video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009) and has developed to expand across further games, comic series, novels and an animated film.<sup>252</sup> In this series, the Arkhamverse Batman is presented in a complex of stories from multiple media that do not hold a hierarchy in which a single iteration is prioritised as canon over other derivatives. Instead, these productions collectively shape the Arkham version of Batman, adding depth to the broader portrayal of the

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<sup>249</sup> Robert Stam, ‘Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation’, in *Film Adaptation*, ed. by James Naremore (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp. 54–78, p. 66.

<sup>250</sup> Miszuk, ‘On Continuity in Comic Book Film Adaptations and Beyond’, p. 223.

<sup>251</sup> Miszuk, ‘On Continuity in Comic Book Film Adaptations and Beyond’, p. 222; Henry Jenkins, ‘Transmedia 202: Further Reflections — Pop Junctions’, *Henry Jenkins*, 31 July 2011.

<sup>252</sup> Rocksteady Studios, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, 2009, video game.

character.<sup>253</sup> Thus, Batman is represented more as a collective icon that arches over a variety of text types, media and perceptions.

For these reasons, this thesis approaches Batman as a cultural complex that brings together stories, character traits, intertextual references across media, and broader cultural and historical reflections. Because this dissertation relies primarily on textual analysis, the aim is not to trace direct correlations between fictional representation and real-world reference points, but rather to map instances of viewing pleasure across history, selecting cases that are representative and illustrative rather than bound to a single decade. In doing so, this approach highlights the enduring cultural resonance of superhero comics in relation to the present, potentially contributing to research about how Batman comics influence contemporary readers' perceptions of masculine norms.

I have been aware of the extremely long list of historical publications centred on Batman, which is even practically inexhaustible if counting in issues featuring him as a marginal character, which is beyond the capacity of the microscopic textual analysis this thesis adopts. Therefore, the materials selected for case-studies are based on the following criteria for better representability: the individual issues should be official major-line production of the DC Comics with the Bruce Wayne Batman as the main protagonist.<sup>254</sup> They either have the potential of illustrating a classic or typical phenomenon that appears frequently and repetitively at least in one era of the comic history, or the issue/artist is widely recognised as influential historically or socio-culturally. For example, many of the examples' original cover arts are selected as the most representative covers of the DC Comics' history, such as *Detective Comics* Vol1 #241 (1957), *Batman* Vol1 #181 (1966), *The Dark Knight Returns*(1986), *Batman* Vol 1 # 497 (1993), *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight Halloween Special* (1993), the 'Hush' story arc (2002), *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2002).<sup>255</sup> Examples are intentionally selected from all the comic eras to provide a comprehensive overview of Batman as an existing cultural complex that condenses an accumulation of

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<sup>253</sup> Carole, 'Batman: Arkham Games and Comics in Order', *Comic Book Treasury*, 2 August 2021.

<sup>254</sup> Although it might sound redundant to clarify, in the publication history of DC Comics, several characters other than Bruce Wayne has contributed to the Batman legacy, such as Dick Grayson (1994–95 and 2009–2011), Azreal (1993-94), Jim Gordon (2015-16), the iconic 'Battle of the Crowl' story arc featuring all four Robins assuming the Batman mantle (2009), and diegetically Thomas Wayne as the very first Batman in DC Comics' cannon (1956). In addition, since re-reading and the fandom culture are not the focus of this dissertation, fan publications and non-authorised parodies are not included in the example cases.

<sup>255</sup> Nick Jones, *DC Comics Cover Art* (London: DK, 2020), pp. 46, 62, 140, 142-143, 149.

artists' personal efforts and broader cultural phenomena over the last century, in the hope to reflect how the historical presentations of such a long-lasting character remain relative, directly or indirectly, to the industrial comic products today.

### 2.2.3.3 *Batman periodisation*

Although this thesis is not organised in chronological sequence, it is still necessary to briefly introduce the history of superhero comics and how the shifts in Batman's characterisation fit into the periodisation. This overview helps situate the case-studies within the periodisation of comics and contextualise a focused issue within the overall DC comics' publication landscape. A complete timeline of all case-studies is provided in the Appendix 1.

Which historical events or publications mark the periodisation of modern U.S. comics is still contested, but the Golden, Silver, and Bronze Ages are generally recognised as the standard framework by scholars and the industry alike. As one of the most widely referenced periodisation categories, Gemstone Publishing, a comics distribution publishing house owned by Steve Geppi, proposed to segment the periods as follows:

- The Golden Age (1938-45), initiated by the debut of Superman in the first publication of *Action Comics* #1
- The Silver Age (1956-71), marked by *Showcase* #4
- The Bronze Age (1971-85), initiated by the publication of *Amazing Spider-Man* #121<sup>256</sup>

Between 1945 and 1956, Gemstone Publishing's periodisation includes 'the Atom Age' based on the international panic of nuclear weapons, as agreed by Alex Grand, except for minor discrepancies in the starting events of each era.<sup>257</sup> Rhoades challenged the concept of both the independence and periodisation of an atomic age and argued that it should be a subsection of the Golden Age, signified by the first appearance of an atomic bomb in superhero comics in 1946.<sup>258</sup> In this view, the first three ages become consecutive, with the Golden Age extended to 1955, which is also a division commonly applied in period-focused

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<sup>256</sup> Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, p. 5.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.; Alex Grand, *Understanding Superhero Comic Books: A History of Key Elements, Creators, Events and Controversies* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2023), pp. 9-10.

<sup>258</sup> Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, p. 45.

academic monographs, such as *The Comic Book Heroes: From the Silver Age to the Present* (1985), *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (2014), *Secondary Superheroes of Golden Age Comics* (2020), and *Comic Book Women: Characters, Creators, and Culture in the Golden Age* (2022).<sup>259</sup> Because of such wide acceptance, this thesis follows the time stamps in the Gemstone periodisation.

After the first three metallurgically titled Ages, definitions of the later Ages diverge considerably. To briefly illustrate such a chaotic status, Gemstone Publishing's timeline suggests the Ages following the Bronze Age should be: 'Copper', 'Chrome' and 'Modern', while Rhoades's division is 'Modern' (including Copper and Chromium) and 'Post-modern', and Grand's being 'Dark/Copper', 'Extreme' and 'Movie' Ages.<sup>260</sup> Coogan follows Thomas Schatz's categorisation that stretches the timeline to include the pre-Golden Age time as 'the Antediluvian Age' and the time after Bronze as 'Iron' and 'Renaissance'.<sup>261</sup> Specifically celebrating DC Comics' history, Paul Levitz concludes the periods after the mid-1980s as the Dark Age (1984-1998), the Modern Age (1998-2010) and the Digital Age (2010-).<sup>262</sup> Comparing these overlapping periodisation systems, a key difference lies in how to describe the periods after the Bronze Age. Since the research approach of this thesis does not heavily rely on accurate periodisation, reference will only be made to the era after the Bronze Age as the Modern Age (1986-) in general.

Within this period, DC Comics went through several major publication cycles, which can serve as more accurate time stamps. In 1985-86, DC Comics published *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, marking that the company moved forward from the Bronze Age and dived into the Post-Crisis era (1985-2011).<sup>263</sup> This 12-issue limited series is DC Comics' first-ever attempt at restarting the entire collection of its superhero publications by restoring the fictional timeline to the initial status of a character with modernising revisions to their character

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<sup>259</sup> Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones, *The Comic Book Heroes: From the Silver Age to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985); José Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*; Lou Mougin, *Secondary Superheroes of Golden Age Comics* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020); Peyton Brunet and Blair Davis, *Comic Book Women: Characters, Creators, and Culture in the Golden Age* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022).

<sup>260</sup> Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*

<sup>261</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, pp. 193-195; Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and The Studio System* (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1981).

<sup>262</sup> Paul Levitz, *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking* (Cologne: Taschen, 2017).

<sup>263</sup> Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (New York: DC Comics, 1985-86).

designs. Following 26 years of relatively stable development of the comic universe, DC Comics experienced a string of very short publication cycles. After the Post-Crisis event, the New 52 serialisation portrays the landscape of an alternative universe, serving the function of a soft reboot that re-initialised the major titles and lasted from 2011 to 2016. In 2016, the Rebirth initiative radically rebooted the main universe of DC Comics, followed by periodical brandings and initiatives running in the same background setting. Sequentially, the following stages are: DC Universe (2017–2020), Infinite Frontier (2021–2022) and Dawn of DC (2023–Present). These short editorial initiatives serve as branding time stamps and do not influence the overall settings and accumulated storylines.

Golden Age Batman was introduced as a grim and pulp-inspired vigilante, heavily influenced by crime fiction and film noir.<sup>264</sup> This era, described by Jenkins as ‘a period of articulation and discovery’,<sup>265</sup> also features creativity and experiments in expanding Batman’s characterisation, relationships and worldviews, establishing many enduring hallmarks of the mythos, such as Batman’s origin story in *Detective Comics* Vol 1 #33 (1939), Robin’s debut in *Detective Comics* Vol 1 #38 (1940), and the first time of naming the Gotham City in *Batman* Vol 1 #4 (1940).<sup>266</sup> Transitioning from the Golden Age and the Silver Age is not strictly identifiable in Batman comics, since the turning point between these two ages did not happen in Batman titles but in the Flash series. What is certain is that *Batman* Vol 1 #225 (1955) is likely to be one of the earliest Silver Age Batman comics, as it was reprinted in 1992 as the first Batman issue in the *DC Silver Age Classics* series.<sup>267</sup> The Silver Age is known for its light-mood fantasies, setting off Batman and Robin as icons of the camp culture with the television adaptation and following comic productions. Then, recognised by *Batman: The Bronze Age Omnibus* (2017), the Bronze Age run of the Batman series started with *Batman* #217 in 1969 — slightly earlier than the genre’s general division — shifting the tone of this character from the whimsical vibe of Silver Age Batman to a relatively darker, more reality-grounded path. Then, the mid-80s marks a unique transformation era of the history of modern superhero culture, praised as ‘an unprecedented

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<sup>264</sup> Les Daniels, *Batman the Complete History: The Life and Times of the Dark Knight* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), pp. 3-16.

<sup>265</sup> Henry Jenkins, ‘“Just Men in Tights”: Rewriting Silver Age Comics in an Era of Multiplicity’, in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, ed. by Angela Ndalians (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 16–43.

<sup>266</sup> Bill Finger and others, ‘The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom’, *DC Comics*, *Detective Comics*, 1.33 (1939); Bill Finger and others, ‘Batman and “Robin the Boy Wonder”’, *DC Comics*, *Detective Comics*, 1.38 (1940); Bill Finger and others, ‘The Case of the Joker’s Crime Circus’, *DC Comics*, *Batman*, 1.4 (1940).

<sup>267</sup> Dennis O’Neil and others, ‘Wanted for Murder-One, the Batman’, *DC Comics*, *Batman*, 1.225 (1970).

renaissance’ and ‘the third movement’. In this era, innovative resources and styles, such as underground comics and Japanese manga, are incorporated into mainstream USA comics. This era also witnessed a merger between USA and UK comics traditions after the ‘British invasion’, meaning that British writers and artists made iconic contributions to the USA comic industry that later defined the Modern Age.<sup>268</sup> In this stage, Batman’s character image underwent significant revisions and re-imaginings, especially after the reboot in the Post-Crisis era. It merged the two Batman images in the Golden Age and in the Silver/Bronze Ages, rebooting the series with a revisit to Batman’s origin story and a more explorative, artistic dark tone of writing and artwork. Today, the Batman series is characterised by diversified explorations of both the boundary of the genre and the possibilities of representation and visibility, incorporating the representative trends in past eras with the interests of the present readers.

### 2.2.3 Reading Comics: The Analytical Form Explained

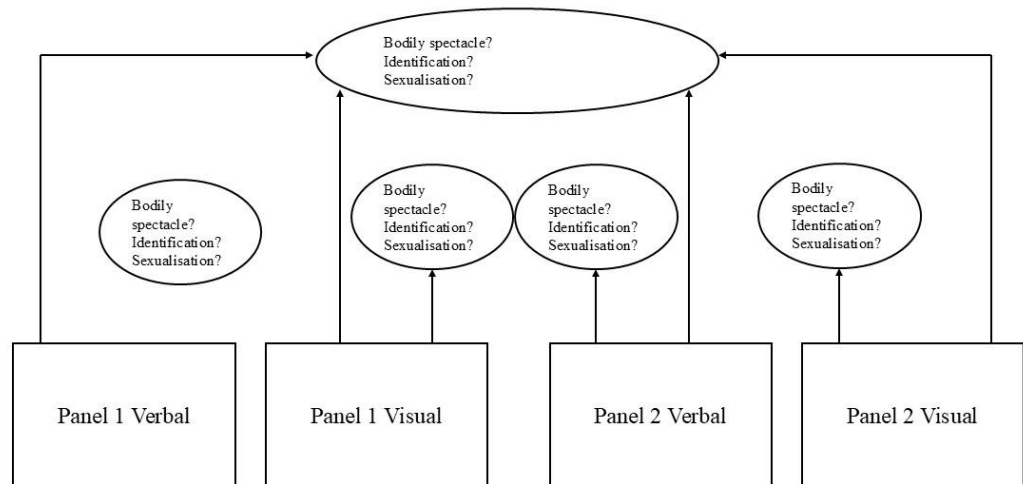
To break down the layered information delivery and illustrate the distribution of gaze-inducing devices, I developed an analytical form to facilitate further discussions on the influence of individual text/image elements and their collaboration in multimodal meaning-making. In Section 2.2.1, I have discussed several current frameworks for interpreting the meaning-making devices in visual-verbal narratives. Specifically, for the purpose of identifying and analysing gaze, these elements should be incorporated into a systematic framework that captures both their individual meanings and their combined effects. Taking inspiration from Cohn’s visual language grammar,<sup>269</sup> the initial model was a hierarchical tree that separates visual and verbal elements at the fundamental level and uses layers of arcs to describe the combination of elements (Graph 2.2.3). However, this structure has two unnegotiable shortcomings: first, the presentation would become too clumsy to follow if the case study contains more than a few panels. This suggests that hierarchy trees using single panels as the minimum unit, although suitable for grammatical analysis, are not well-suited to storytelling analysis, which typically involves multiple panels within a single narrative arc. Second, the hierarchical structure can hardly reflect the connection between panels that

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<sup>268</sup> Ben Little, ‘2000AD: Understanding the “British Invasion” of American Comics’, in *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives*, ed. by Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), pp. 140–52.

<sup>269</sup> See Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*, p. 78-79, for examples of the hierarchy tree in the visual language grammar system.

are separated by multiple panels within a large storyarc; for example, if a narrative arc contains ten panels and the final panel calls back to the first to create emphasis, the connecting arrow between them would overlap with other arrows representing grammatical hierarchy, since this connection is driven by storytelling rather than grammar.



*1\_Graph 2.2.3 Initial design of the analytical framework*

Moving on from the hierarchical structure, I redesigned the presentation of the framework for analysing gaze into a form-based structure. The pilot version of the form (Form 2.2.3-1) is in a horizontal layout, in which each group of meaning-making devices generated by multiple panels takes one column. Similar to the hierarchical tree, this structure allows clear records and flexible combinations of adjacent panels, but the layout makes it even more impossible to describe the connection between distant panels. Moreover, the horizontal format makes it inconvenient to reference in a portrait-oriented thesis. Another aspect I experimented with was the structure of the form, specifically whether to document the details of each unit as a factual basis first, and then indicate their relevance to gaze in the corresponding cells. Although the forms may be easier to read as a stand-alone section in this format, overly detailed records ultimately hinder the identification of patterns. In addition, lengthy descriptions tend to repeat points made in the analysis and reduce the space available for visual elements, even in a landscape layout. Thus, the final version of the form adopts a vertical layout, integrating the description of cross-panel elements within unified cells and recording their relevance to gaze using a categorising measure.

Serials	Modalities	In-panel bodily presentation	In-panel identification devices	In-panel objectification devices	In-panel sexualisation devices	Spatial-topical parameters	Panel transition in the narrative arc	Cross-panel identification Narration	Cross-panel objectification Narration	cross-panel sexualisation narration
Panel 1	Verbal									
	Visual									

*1\_Form 2.2.3-1 Pilot format of the analytical form*

The following sample illustrates the structure of the finalised analytical form. In this version, the meaning-making process is grouped into two categories: the content within a panel and the collection of multiple panels on a single page. Each form is labelled using the following format: section number – comic page number. For example, the following case in Section 3.1.1 covers p. 4 of the sourced comic, so its analytical form is marked as Form 3.1.1-4. Each form covers only one page of the source comics, and the first row of the form records the original page and sequence of extracted panels, for example, the 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> panels on a given page. The selected panels are renumbered by their sequence, starting from Panel 1 in the ‘In-panel elements’ section, and collectively, their compositions and narrative functions are described in the ‘Cross-panel elements’ section.

Source:					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal				
	Multi				
	Visual				
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters					
Narrative functions					
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification	Sexualisation	

2\_Form 2.2.3-2 Finalised sample form for gaze analysis

Both the in-panel and cross-panel categories track the presentation of source comics and then provide an evaluation of the gaze they induce. In the ‘In-panel Elements’ category, firstly, panel contents are divided into three types based on their modalities; in other words, whether an element mainly consists of verbal texts, images or both. In the ‘Modalities’ section, verbal texts (‘Verbal’) and visual-verbal texts (‘Multi’) are recorded in the sequence of speech bubbles, thought bubbles and caption boxes. The original spelling, punctuation and font styles — most frequently italic and bold — have been kept for a quicker reference to the tone and emphasis in the source comics.<sup>270</sup> The typefaces, on the other hand, are standardised to be consistent with the thesis, since the majority of examples’ verbal texts use Comic Sans and its variants. The images in the following ‘Visual’ row provide additional references for interpreting visual-verbal elements, including graphic onomatopoeias and other text-related visual features such as speech bubble shapes. These entries about verbal text help improve the readability of the textual components in illustrations and avoid clumsy descriptions when referring to specific lines or words.

<sup>270</sup> Typos, although happening very rarely, are also kept as they are, to minimise personal interpretations in transcripts.

After the verbal and verbal-visual texts, the pictures in comics are segmented and put into the ‘Visual’ row. This section does not reflect the comparative size differences or compositional arrangement among panels. Instead, it aims to highlight what is depicted in the image and how it is visually presented through artistic choices, such as stylistic distortion, linear perspective, and composition, while ruling out the interference of panel size and placement. For image processing, Procreate 5.3.15 was used to cut out the visual components of individual panels. When panels are recognisably bordered with lines, frames or other shapes, they are extracted along the borders while excluding the gutters. When borderlines do not strictly define the panels, the extent of these panels is identified depending on the context. This is based on the integrity of representational objects, such as a character or an environmental object, or on the consistency of colouring, such as the range of background colours. As the placement of verbal texts and the aspect ratio influence the layout, and hence the focus, of an image, further editing of the pictures was not performed.

Then, the three following columns evaluate the relevance of each element in creating the gaze. As explained in the theoretical framework, the gaze consists of both the act of looking and the pleasure of identification and/or sexualisation. Firstly, the ‘Bodily spectacle’ column suggests whether a bodily image is significantly stylised or positioned to raise the attention of readers, which determines the priority of the gaze: the act of looking. The presentation or revealing of bodily features can be visually dramatic, such as extremely elongated proportions or a centralised composition, but can also be physically sensual in a literary or metaphorical manner in the verbal texts, such as a detailed description of a character's body parts. The variables of this section are recorded in two outcomes: ‘Y’ for confirming a spectacle of bodily images, and ‘N’ for the lack of such. Secondly, the ‘Identification’ section suggests whether an image or text intends to appeal to readers’ identification experience, such as recognition, empathy or self-projection, pointing to the narcissistic pleasure in gazing. This section also covers the devices that prevent readers from identifying with a character, i.e., alienation. For example, an extremely long shot literally puts distance between the character and the readers; metaphorically, alienation can also be achieved when a character is dehumanised and objectified. The results are recorded as ‘I’ for identification, ‘A’ for alienation, and ‘N’ for the panels that are irrelevant to both efforts. Thirdly, the ‘Sexualisation’ section examines the relevance of gender and sexuality in a textual element, which provides libidinal pleasure in the gaze and helps to explore its connection with gender norms. The references to sexualisation in the case materials are commonly found in rather straightforward specifications about gender identities — such as ‘men’ — and descriptions

of romantic interests. Occasionally, signs of sexualisation lie in the socio-historical context of a comic, such as the entanglement of homophobia and anti-Soviet movements in the creation of Soviet Union-based characters. The variables of this section are recorded as ‘S’ for sexualisation, ‘D’ for desexualisation, and ‘N’ for no relevance.

Moving on to the cross-panel section, this section mainly processes a panel’s graphic presentation within the frame of a page and its narrative function within a visual language structure. In the row of ‘Spatial-topical parameters’, the compositional characteristics of the selected panels, such as their shapes, sizes and locations on the page, as well as the number of panels in a single page, are noted down. These features influence the pace and gravity of a page, visually manipulating readers’ attention and highlighting some panels over others. The next row, ‘Narrative functions’, briefly concludes the overall story arc containing the extracted panels, and, if applicable, sub-arcs that focus on a specific motion or a small event. The record also specifies the panels’ roles in the arcs, which have been explained in Section 2.2.3 ‘Transition and Narration across Panels’. This section provides a context for the extract from the storytelling perspective, addressing the contribution of narration in creating emphasis in a comic story. Similar to words and images within a panel, the graphic and narrative elements of multiple panels that encourage the readers’ gaze are also analysed from aspects of ‘Bodily spectacles’, ‘identification’ and ‘sexualisation’ and recorded with the same abbreviations.

The straightforward strength of using analytical forms, rather than full comic pages, is that forms can provide clear references to specific elements. For the convenience of discussion, categorising and numbering texts and images in a list is more practical and easier to follow than other common methods of illustration used in panel-by-panel textual analysis of comics. If comic pages are used as illustrations without any editing, readers will have to locate the panels in discussion either by counting or by matching descriptions with images, which is especially problematic in comics with many small panels, such as Golden Age titles or more experimental works like *The Dark Knight Returns*. Instead, if numbers are added to the original comic pages, this method can also pose challenges. The numbers may either be so prominent that they interfere with the visual presentation, or so small and crowded that they are difficult to read, particularly in potential black-and-white printing of this thesis. Moreover, many of these panels included in the illustration would not be directly analysed in the discussion section. In comparison, analytical forms not only avoid the need for panel-

counting, or overly detailed descriptions to identify specific panels or lines, but also help minimise disruption to the visual presentation of the source comics.

More importantly, the form highlights the layered structure of information in multimodal texts by distinguishing meaning-making elements both individually and in combination, which visualises the analytical framework more appropriately than full-page illustrations. Isolating textual and visual elements helps clarify analytical focus by minimising the influence of other modalities. For example, extracting verbal text from the original comic allows the content of a character's speech to take analytical priority over its visual features, such as colour or typeface. Furthermore, identifying the impact of each modality helps reveal patterns in which elements contribute to directing the viewer's gaze and which do not. In comparison, presenting entire comic pages may overemphasise the integration of text and image, while overlooking the distinct contributions each makes to meaning. For example, in a case-study where the verbal text emphasises a character's corporeal experience while the visual representation omits the body, an analytical form with separate entries for text and image illustrates this discrepancy more clearly and precisely than an unannotated comic page.

Since analytical forms allow for quick identification of the referenced segments and effectively visualise the theoretical framework, the following three chapters will use forms to trace gaze manipulation in the case-studies, following a brief introduction to the content and background of the selected comics. Next, to determine whether an element is relevant to the gaze, comic analysis theories will be drawn on to explain the evaluation process. Finally, the findings will be synthesised by identifying recurring patterns of gaze induction and exploring how these patterns contribute to constructing or challenging normalised representations of masculinity.

## Chapter 3 (Not) Looking Makes the Man: Construction and Reinforcement

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault famously points out that relations of power, social rules of conformity, and cultural expectations both influence and become manifested on the human body.<sup>271</sup> In comics, the body and the power of bodily images is yet filtered by another layer of perception: the action of looking, as relevant presentations and narratives are manipulated in comics' multi-modal texts and invite readers into the power play of norms and bodies — 'Every literary text is an invitation to a voyeur's enterprise, constructing as it does a frame around the image and activity of some other as it stages for itself and for us a particular view'.<sup>272</sup> Developing Foucault's argument, Mulvey's gaze analysis reveals how viewing from readers connects power and bodily images, which, when specifically applied to male bodies in superhero comics, helps to understand how visibility functions as a mechanism that produces hierarchies of visibility — and sometimes invisibility — to prioritise some forms of gender performances over others. Bongco concludes that, unsurprisingly, superheroes' performance of masculinity relies on superficial visible signs of 'being muscular' and 'excelling in brute strength', but, more importantly, it is a demonstration of power by resolving power struggles and gaining public recognition.<sup>273</sup> Situating primarily in a visual culture tradition that originated in the Western — especially North American — society, such desirability and recognition normalise a superhero's version of the masculine body and physicality as the expected form of masculinity in the cultures that have accommodated or absorbed superhero narratives in their modern sense, extending the association of male bodily images beyond their literal sense.

To explore what gender norms are typically internalised in superhero narratives, this chapter covers five cases that focus on the establishment of the dominant convention of masculinity. The first two cases centre on invisibility and the rejection of gaze, illustrating how shadows, applied as a concealing tool, conflict with gaze-guiding devices. In these cases, the missing

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<sup>271</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Shendan (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), Part Three, Section 1.

<sup>272</sup> Deborah A. Harter, *Bodies in Pieces: Fantastic Narrative and the Poetics of the Fragment* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 52.

<sup>273</sup> Bongco, *Reading Comics*, p. 115.

object of the gaze contributes to imbalanced power dynamics among all the participants of the gaze, namely the protagonist, the antagonist, and the readers. By confirming the connection between viewing and power in comic texts, these two case-studies lay the prerequisite for discussing dominance and gender performance in the following cases. The next section explores three more cases, ranging from modern Batman to more classic Golden Age examples, to examine common features associated with superhero masculinity, including muscular physiques, hyper-functioning physical prowess, and resilience to traumas. With gaze analysis, these cases identify the cultural associations in bodily images and their relative narratives, pointing out that gazes can endow Batman's gender embodiment and performance with additional symbolic implications, prioritising such a complex of masculinity to be representational, desirable, and normative.

### 3.1 Concealing

Almost counterintuitively, I would like to start the exploration of the graphic and narrative gaze by examining the intentional lack thereof: the concealment of male bodies. Comics, being a visual art in nature, provide a reading experience that is constantly relevant to looking, viewing and appreciating. The ubiquity of looking makes it challenging to differentiate what is coded with viewing pleasure and what is simply drawn for the need of information or convenience; in other words, to identify the to-be-looked-at-ness in gaze without a reference to what an unachieved or blocked gaze looks like. Thus, this section will focus on the cases where visual or verbal elements intend to inspire a gaze at the protagonist, while the protagonist's body, as the gazed object itself, is concealed or absent. By exploring different levels of concealment and power positions, the cases studied reaffirm that manipulation of viewing, even if on a textual level, is an act of power. Confirming the connection between gazing and the hierarchy in the reader-protagonist-antagonist triangle provides an initial approach to the research question about power and self-projection, which helps to lay a foundation for the next section's discussion on visibility and the establishment of gender role models.

By concealment, I mean a straightforward inability to be seen — being intentionally cut out of a frame, being omitted in a narrative arc, or, very literally, being painted into a solid inked block. The former two are easy to observe. For example, when a character points at the other, while the addressee is not included in the panel, their presence is virtually impossible to be visually perceived but only to be logically deduced. In Case 3.1.1, there is an example of

such intentional avoidance of visibility. The rendering of blackened objects, which in most cases means shadows, needs more explanation. In comics, the division of light and darkness, which is usually rendered as inked areas, is not restrained to realism but can also be artistically stylised to deliver information. The stylisation necessity can disregard the limitations of realistic lighting rules, which, as explained in *The DC Comics Guide to Coloring and Lettering Comics*, are in general divided into two categories: cast shadow — the shadow on the object itself, and form shadow — the shadow an object casts.<sup>274</sup> When the shadow on a visual representation does not conform to these types, it is likely that the darkness is used to block the readers' observation, conceal the characters' physique and thus reject readers' gaze.

In the Batman series, such examples are abundant and readily identifiable because darkness and fear are significant components of Batman's characterisation. Also known as the Dark Knight, Batman has a strong reference to gothic literature, involving a complexity of classic elements, such as bats with culturally-loaded symbolism, dark aesthetics, urban mythologies and, most importantly, the manipulation of power projection with fear. In *The Horror Comics Never Dies: A Gristly History*, Walton reviews DC Comics' historical engagement of horror fantasies, both as an element and as an independent genre.<sup>275</sup> Their lists of Batman publications illustrate how Batman's cultural complex is highly involved in the exploration of fictional fear and sensations. In comics, Batman frequently expresses his pursuit of using fear and mystery to control crimes across different canonical continuities and is frequently perceived as an urban legend or superstition by characters who are not closely engaged in his vigilante career. 'The whole point of a vigilante is to terrify the terrible — to strike fear into the hearts of evildoers',<sup>276</sup> as John C. Wright's comment on the appeal of the Batman stories roughly concludes. From Batman stories that directly engage with the theme of fear, the following case-studies are a Halloween special issue of Batman periodicals and an issue about Batman enacting indirect murder, to represent two levels of horrifying concealment: him being a nightmare for his fictional enemies and for the readers.

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<sup>274</sup> Chiarello and Klein, *The DC Comics Guide to Coloring and Lettering Comics*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>275</sup> Michael Walton, *The Horror Comic Never Dies: A Grisly History* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2019), pp. 7-22; see William Schoell, *The Horror Comics: Fiends, Freaks and Fantastic Creatures, 1940s-1980s* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014) for a broader context of horror elements in popular comics.

<sup>276</sup> John C. Wright, 'Heroes of Darkness and Light: Or, Why My Girl Goes for Batman Over Superman', in *Batman Unauthorized: Vigilantes, Jokers, and Heroes in Gotham City*, ed. by Dennis O'Neil and Leah Wilson (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2008), pp. 181-96, p. 182.

### 3.1.1 'Choices' and Invisibility as Mystification

'Choices', scripted by Jeph Loeb and pencilled by Tim Sale, is the first issue from *the Halloween Special of Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight* (1993).<sup>277</sup> Developing the theme of fear with visualised experiences of gothic horror, this issue provides a strong example of how shadows are used as a tool to block gazes. 'Choices' opens with a night scene characterised by a dark and gloomy tone, establishing a foreboding atmosphere in which Batman relentlessly pursues Scarecrow, a villain known for using fear-inducing chemicals. The initial section of this issue's narrative arc, including pp. 1-6, depicts Batman as a mystical, fearsome avenger in the eyes of the mobsters he haunts for the information of Scarecrow. Centralising horrifying spectacles as the key feature, this issue switches between characters' viewing perspectives and a stand-alone viewing point, guiding readers' gaze to notice the absence of bodily presentation. The following sections will give a close analysis of pp. 4-6, exploring how it establishes a power structure that implies the superiority of Batman over antagonists.

#### 3.1.1.1 Form analysis

Forms 3.1.1-4, 3.1.1-5 and 3.1.1-6 cover pp. 4-6 in 'Choices', depicting Batman violently invading the secret base of a group of minor antagonists. Starting from the signal of Batman's entry, Form 3.1.1-4 includes the last two panels of p. 4, and Form 3.1.1-5 includes both panels on p. 5, which portray the detailed process of Batman's break-in. Form 3.1.1-6 selects the first two parallel panels of p. 6 as the Peak and Prolongations of the combat scene.

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<sup>277</sup> Jeph Loeb and others, 'Choices', *DC Comics*, *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight Halloween Special*, 1.1 (1993).

Source: panels 3-4, p. 4, <i>Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight, Halloween Special</i> (1993)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacles	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	HEY! WHO TURNED OUT THE LIGHTS?	N	N	N
		WHOEVER HE IS JUST BOUGHT A HEAP OF TROUBLE. SAM, COVER THE FRONT DOOR. SIMON, YOU--	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<i>I'M ONLY GOING TO ASK YOU ONCE.</i>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Large, long horizontal panels with clear borders and gutters; growth in size.				
Narrative functions	Initial-Establisher (Arc: Batman broke in.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacles		Identification		Sexualisation
	N		I		N

3\_Form 3.1.1-4 Batman reveals himself to the antagonists, p. 4, *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight, Halloween Special*.

Source: panels 1-2, p. 5, <i>Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight, Halloween Special</i> (1993)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily Spectacles	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	WHERE IS JONATHAN CRANE?	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	I	D
Panel 2	Verbal	IT'S--THE B-BATMAN!	N	N	N
		THERE'S <b>FOUR</b> OF US! LET'S TAKE HIM!	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Two panels in one frame; overlaying panels divided by Panel 2's thin gutter; Panel 1 serves as the background and does not have a frame.				
Narrative functions	Prolongation (Arc: Batman broke in.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacles		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		A		N

4\_Form 3.1.1-5 Batman prepares to attack the antagonists, p. 5, *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight, Halloween Special*.

Source: panels 1-2, p. 6, <i>Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight, Halloween Special</i> (1993)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily Spectacles	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	
Panel 2	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Thin, parallel vertical panels divided by borders and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Peak (Arc: Batman broke in.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacles		Identification	Sexualisation	
	Y		A	D	

5\_Form 3.1.1-6 Batman attacks the antagonists, p. 6. *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight, Halloween Special*.

### 3.1.1.2 Temporary identification and dramatic tension

Before the Peak of Batman's attack in Form 3.1.1-6, both the visual and verbal texts are composed from the perspective of the antagonist, positioning the focal point — readers' observing point — among the group of antagonists to create geographical alignment. On pp. 4-5, most panels contain visual devices that control the implied spectatorial positions and perspectives, intending to induce readers' temporary identification with the antagonists

rather than the protagonist.<sup>278</sup> Both Panel 1 Form 3.1.1-4 and Panel 2 Form 3.1.1-5 are close-ups of the mobsters' shoulders and faces, placing readers in close range of these antagonists and distanced from the protagonist. In Panel 1, Form 3.1.1-4, the characters' viewing direction points flatly forward towards the readers at an eye-level height, implying that the spectators are also a part of their group. When Panel 2 jumps to an overhead angle in a long shot, the subversion of the viewing angle and distance creates an element of surprise corresponding to the characters' facial expressions, indicating that the antagonists have lost control of the invader. In Panel 2 on the following page (Form 3.1.1-5), the mobsters' bust-up portraits are positioned between the focal point and a distant depiction of Batman, creating pictorial depth that distances Batman from the viewer while also placing readers among the antagonists. Aligning readers with antagonists defamiliarises the identity of a well-known character like Batman and mystifies his potential threat. Collectively, the antagonists function as a surrogate for readers to experience the intimidation of the protagonist's power.

Then, Panel 2, Form 3.1.1-4 and Panel 1, Form 3.1.1-5 form a pair of exchange gazes between Batman and the antagonists that imply Batman's advantage. Panel 2 Form 3.1.1-4 is the only panel from the protagonist's point of view in the Initial and Establisher. In this panel, the visual briefly switches to Batman's viewing perspective to give an overview of the antagonists, which precludes Batman's role as a repetitive visual figure who leads the narrator, a stable third-person monstrator in Groensteen's terminology, in the entire issue. Next, Panel 1, 3.1.1-5 follows the bird-eye angle of Panel 2, Form 3.1.1-4 with a counterpart low-angle shot, providing a direct first-person viewing that merges the readers' gaze with that of the antagonists. Within the alternation of perspectives, the gazes of Batman-reader and antagonist-reader match the relative spatial relations of Batman, standing high above, and the group of antagonists on the ground. More importantly, the locked gaze between the protagonist and antagonists marks a hostile relationship with dramatic tension. The downward-looking visual, showing Batman's gaze fully projected onto the antagonists, is a

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<sup>278</sup> It should be noted that this discussion analyses comic art techniques and the effects conventionally associated with them in artistic practice, without implying that individual readers will necessarily respond in a uniform or predictable manner. It is reasonable to expect variations in reception because of readers' personal experience, preference, cultural background, visual literacy, familiarity with the genre and the specific comic issue, and other factors. For neurological research on how individuals emotionally respond to visual stimuli, see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error - Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon Books, 1994), pp. 136-39.

strong return to their act of looking, which puts the protagonist in a higher power position and foreshadows his victory in the later story arc when he leads the narration.

### 3.1.1.3 *Visibility as a site of power*

Under the clear formation of the antagonist-readers' gaze, on pp. 4-5, the superhero's body, in contrast to the antagonists', is constantly kept hidden or only partially revealed, creating a sense of horror to reinforce Batman's dominance. Firstly, the Establisher and Prolongations employ chiaroscuro to obscure Batman within shadow, constructing a visual asymmetry wherein his opponents are fully illuminated and thus rendered more visually accessible to the readers. In Panel 2, Form 3.1.1-4, as the readers' viewing merges with Batman's observation from the same perspective, the antagonists' facial expressions and body language of panic and surprise are plainly visible and thus under control. In contrast, by depicting the antagonists staring in the direction of Batman-reader, this panel puts Batman at the end of receiving the antagonists' gaze but only implies his shape with a shadow of Batman's cape instead of directly showing his figure. Moreover, the lack of an arrow on the speech bubble suggests an unknown speaker, further mystifying the antagonists' gaze object. The rejection of viewing blocks the readers' exploration of the protagonist, obscuring him as an invisible subject that cannot be comprehended. In *Terrors of Uncertainty*, Grixti defines horror as a complex of cultural references, such as 'weird' or 'uncanny' presentations and sensational responses such as pain, loathing, and fear.<sup>279</sup> Here, stylising Batman's body into an inhuman shadow, along with the antagonists' shocking response, appropriately fits this definition.

Next, both Panel 1 and Panel 2 in Form 3.1.1-5 use shadows to create a contradiction between centralised visual attention and a rejection of gaze. In these two panels, the spatial parameters and compositional factors suggest Batman is supposed to be the object of the readers' and the antagonists' gaze. Without borderlines, Panel 1 extends to consist of more than 2/3 of p. 5 to emphasise the spectacular entrance of Batman, which is consistent with the antagonists' line of gaze on Batman and also creates a gravity centre in the reader's viewing. However, hidden completely in the shadowed cape, Batman's face and body are entirely wrapped in inhumanly shaped blackness that indicates no limbs or physique of a

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<sup>279</sup> Joseph Grixti, *Terrors of Uncertainty: The Cultural Contexts of Horror Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. X.

person. The monotoned colour of the background and the darkened outfit contrast with the saturated red in the protagonist's eye, highlighting the only exposed eye as the centre of the image. In this way, readers' gaze is not only blocked, but also returned by the protagonist's staring.

Panel 2 has a similar application of shadows, using a dramatic shadow-light division that lights up the outline of Batman only enough to be recognised by his characteristic silhouette. Any information for characterisation, such as relatable facial expressions or psychological activities in verbal words, is completely inactivated or concealed, implying a higher power position but via mystification. In contrast, the antagonists, although aligned with readers in their direction of looking, are completely exposed to readers as a collective third-person monstrator. With such an active control of the privilege of seeing the protagonist's image, before the Peak on p. 6, the narrative establishes a power structure prioritising Batman over the temporary unit of the antagonists and the readers. In the overall narrative arc, readers are encouraged to follow Batman, who has been a consistent third-person monstrator, as their alignment target. However, this sub-arc of Batman's invasion alienates the readers from the protagonist and challenges their gaze on his physicality, amplifying his power as an intimidating threat beyond mere physical prowess.

Moving on to the Peak on p. 6, the bodily presentation of the protagonist is revealed — and even focused on — in vertical rectangles that take up most of the space in the frame. Prepared by the cliffhanger of Batman's hidden figure, Panels 1-2 in Form 3.3.1-6 turn to a close examination of Batman's bodily performance in intensive physical conflicts. Instead of fully revealing the protagonist's physicality, Panels 1 and 2 in Form 3.1.1-6 consecutively give close-ups of his leg and hand, forming a rhetoric that Kenneth Burke referred to as a 'synecdoche' in literary studies;<sup>280</sup> namely, a part of the body is used to represent the whole. Such fragmented bodies consist of a duality of potential to represent a segmented part and imply a system in its whole at the same time: 'a fragment is always a whole for something smaller, a whole always a part in a larger system', as Deborah Harter argues.<sup>281</sup> By hiding

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<sup>280</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1974, first published 1941), p. 25. For discussions on 'synecdoche' in classics, especially on the theories of Roman rhetoricians, such as Quintilian and Cicero, see Shawn Ramsey, 'Ex Uno Plures: Synecdoche as Argumentative Structure in Roman Defenses of Rhetoric', *Argumentation*, published online 30 October 2025, doi:[10.1007/s10503-025-09679-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-025-09679-8).

<sup>281</sup> Harter, *Bodies in Pieces*, p. 29.

the protagonist's physique, the revealed body parts draw readers' attention to an imagination of its entirety with the closure effect of juxtaposed panels. This visual cue of partial revealing — and thus a suggestion of what is hidden — in the synecdoche generates tension by prompting the viewer's automatic completion of the unseen whole. Such an intuition, as Damasio argues, is an involuntary response out of the control of reasoning and deduction,<sup>282</sup> while the lack of information about the body as a complete object prevents the reasoning from reaching the same conclusion. Hence, a sense of eeriness arises.

In these two panels, the focal point is neither centred on one side of the characters to establish a third-person monstration, nor far away enough to record the protagonist's full body. This alienation suspends the antagonists' narration role in the previous section, using a more detached point of view to show physical spectacles while avoiding empathy for the antagonists when they are assaulted by the protagonist. In the visuals, Batman shows only the minimum body parts, only the attacking parts, while the antagonists' painful faces and hit bodies are depicted in detail. For the protagonist, the fragmented presentation of his body allows the pleasure of observing while maintaining the effect of mystification. The spectacle of muscular body parts signifies a visual reference to physical power and affords the readers' gaze while the protagonist's subjectivity is kept unseen and unevaluable as an object. By using a dehumanised body part as a reference to the entirety of the protagonist, Panels 1-2 present a dramatic contrast between the spectacular discomfort of the antagonists and the rejection of looking in the protagonist's image. The tension between obscurity and exposure magnifies the antagonists' pain as a manifestation of the protagonist's power, consistently maintaining the power distance established by his spectral presence in the past two pages.

#### 3.1.1.4 Evaluation

In the 'Choices' case, when the viewing experience forms a short-term recognition with the antagonists, the protagonist's physicality is concealed in shadows and rejects the exploratory gaze from both the readers and the antagonists. When the gaze is projected from an independent focal point, the spectacle of violence is presented with a contrast of visibility, limiting the spectating of the protagonist by depicting fragmented body parts and applying stylised chiaroscuro. Finally, as the readers' perspective merges with the protagonist, the latter's visual representation remains unexplored in the exchange of gaze between the focal

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<sup>282</sup> Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, pp. 187-88

point and the antagonists, reinforcing the power dynamics based on exposure. In all three cases, visual mystification is used as a device of empowerment that references an active rejection of objectification, making the privilege of obscurity in spectating a sign of power. When readers' alignment is steered away from a temporary participation in the antagonists' side, their empathetic experience with the antagonists' fear turns into reinforcement of the protagonist's power, which is also shared by readers when they project an identifying gaze on him.

### 3.1.2 'Ten Nights of the Beast' and the Villainised Superhero

Developing 3.3.2's discussion about visual obscurity's empowering effect on the protagonist-reader alliance, this section explores the stylised application of shadows to create a more neutral, or even uncomfortable, reading experience with *Batman Vol 1 #420* (1988), 'Ten Nights of the Beast'-part 4 (referred to as 'Ten Nights' for conciseness).<sup>283</sup> Often cited as a pivotal issue that explores the darker facets of Batman's character, 'Ten Nights' exploration of moral ambiguity and the lengths to which Batman will go to protect Gotham has cemented its status as a classic in the Batman canon. As the last issue of a four-issue story arc, #420 tells a story about how Batman protected the USA's national security from the KGBeast, a cybernetically enhanced assassin and spy working for the Soviet Union. In the arc of this issue, Batman was devoted to protecting the USA President Ronald Reagan from the KGBeast's assassination attempt and tracked him down in a sewer when the murder attempt failed, only to find a trail of the governmental special agents' dead bodies leading to the KGBeast's ambush. After an intensive fight, Batman intentionally trapped his opponent in an almost certainly lethal situation, so he did not necessarily kill him with his own hands.

Published during the Cold War era, this issue actively engages with political and ideological discourse, which is typical of superhero narratives of that era, as 'their heroism was defined either in support of, or in opposition to, Ronald Reagan's America'.<sup>284</sup> 'Ten Nights' also develops its fiction using realistic references with such brutality and horror that it has dragged this issue into controversy today. As commented by Christopher Sharrett, 'Ten Nights' narrative establishes a strong correlation between morality and patriotism, especially

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<sup>283</sup> Jim Starlin and others, 'Ten Nights of the Beast - Part 4', *DC Comics*, *Batman*, 1.420 (1988).

<sup>284</sup> Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), p. 2.

right-wing patriotism loyal to Reagan's government, illustrating DiPaolo's observation with 'one-dimensional moral simplicity'.<sup>285</sup> This criticism of the division of the righteous United States and the evil Soviet Union reflects a binary thinking that is amplified by the Cold War and crystallised 'into an American habit of public thought with nearly universal application'.<sup>286</sup> The two major power poles in 'Ten Nights' — the heroic USA vigilante and the villainous USSR assassin — manifest such a cultural-political background.

However, beyond a superficial, simplified USA vs USSR agenda, 'Ten Nights' also shows nuanced complexity in another layer of power struggles: superheroes vs law enforcement officials, which blurs the definitive boundary between what is promoted as 'good' and 'evil'. 'Ten Nights' pushes the off-law vigilante to achieve what the governmental agents are unable to achieve against the threat of a supervillain, in other words, to successfully terminate him, making this issue a famous example of Batman breaking his no-kill rule and stepping into a grey zone.<sup>287</sup> When analysing this morally ambiguous plot, it should be noted that, against the overall binary cultural conflict, Cold War comics also showed signs of flexibility when involving political elements. After the 60s, the anti-communist and anti-Soviet Union tendency within the USA's cultural and political arenas gradually leaned towards general acceptance, even perceiving these ideologies 'in a more favourable light', as positively described by Cynthia Hendershot, along with fluctuating revivals of the conservative re-revisionism.<sup>288</sup> The resurgence of repulsion coexisted with the decline of demonising ideological propaganda, complicating the stances in the representations of the USSR within the domestic cultural products of the USA. Although there is hardly evidence to support a direct link between the twists and turns in social attitudes and the script and pencilling of 'Ten Nights', it nonetheless provides a darker take on the shadowed body of the superhero, which further illustrates that an imbalanced power structure is created by blocking readers' gaze with shadows while using other devices to channel it onto the character. The following examples are selected from Batman's direct conflict with the

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<sup>285</sup> Sharrett, 'Batman and the Twilight of the Idols', p. 35.

<sup>286</sup> Christopher Newfield, 'Cold War and Culture War', in *A Companion to American Literature and Culture*, ed. by Paul Lauter (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010), pp. 72–95, p. 75

<sup>287</sup> Lance Eaton, 'A Superhero for the Times: Superman's Fight Against Oppression and Injustice in the 1930s', in *Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men: Superheroes and the American Experience*, ed. by Julian C. Chambliss and others (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 28–39, pp. 34–35.

<sup>288</sup> Cyndy Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), p. 130; Larry Ceplair, *Anti-Communism in Twentieth-Century America: A Critical History* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011), pp. 191–213.

KGBeast, which is concluded with Batman's attempt to passively kill the KGBeast by trapping him in a sewer chamber and leaving him to drown. In these extract pieces, not only the antagonist, but also the supposedly upright superhero is beyond the façade of a good-against-evil narrative, illustrating a complication in sexualisation and villainisation.

### 3.1.2.1 Form analysis

In case 3.1.2, four pages are selected from #420, arching over the Establisher and Peak of Batman and the KGBeast's final conflict. Form 3.1.2-17 includes the second to the fourth panels on p. 17, which depict the momentary pause between two fights with an exchange of mutual gaze between the two characters. In terms of narrative functions, the entire page in this form belongs to the overall Establisher that aggravates the intensity of the combat between Batman and KGBeast, with multiple minor arcs about individual fights to pace the twists and build up the tension. Panel 1-2 shows that the fight results in a draw, which is the Release of the first round of physical engagement between the two characters, and Panel 3 starts the next round with the KGBeast's first move and Batman's comment as an Initial.

Source: panels 2-4, p. 17, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #420 (1988)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	<i>THE BEAST GIVES ME A PARTING SHOT, SOMETHING TO REMIND ME WHICH OF US IS ARMED.</i>	Y	Y	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	Y	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<i>BUT I MANAGED TO GET A FEW LICKS OF MY OWN.</i>	Y	Y	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	Y	N
Panel 3	Verbal	<i>NEITHER OF US HAS CAUGHT OUR BREATH YET, BUT THAT DOESN'T STOP THE ASSASSIN.</i>	Y	Y	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Parallel, vertical panels. Panels 1 and 2 are juxtaposed and roughly symmetrical.				
Narrative functions	Establisher (Arc: Batman attempted to kill the KGBeast.) Release and Prolongation (Sub arc: Batman and the KGBeast's first fight) Initial (Sub arc: Batman and the KGBeast's second fight)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation		
	Y	I	S		

6\_Form 3.1.2-17 Batman and the KGBeast's hand-to-hand combat, p. 17. Batman Vol 1 #420.

Form 3-4-19 selects one panel (the 7<sup>th</sup> panel) from p. 19, illustrating the turning point that establishes Batman's dominance over the antagonist in the later Peak.

Source: panel 7, p. 19, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #420 (1988)				
In-panel Elements				
Serials	Modalities	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation

Panel 1	Verbal	<i>HE SPOTS THE <b>DOOR</b>, JUST AS I EXPECTED.</i>		N	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions		Y	A	S
Cross-panel Elements						
Spatial-topical parameters	Small, evenly divided vertical panels.					
Narrative functions	Prolongation (Arc: Batman attempted to kill the KGBeast.) Establisher (Sub arc: Batman trapped the KGBeast.)					
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation	
	Y		Y		S	

7\_Form 3.1.2-19 The KGBeast runs towards a deadly trap, p. 19. *Batman Vol 1 #420*.

Forms 3.1.2-20 and 3.1.2-21 include the last panel of p. 20 and the first four panels of p. 21, depicting Batman's decision of indirect killing. These panels represent both the Peak of the overall arc in which Batman defended the national security of the USA from the KGBeast, as well as the Peak of the sub-arc about the last round of combat between them.<sup>289</sup>

Source: panel 5, p. 20, <i>Batman Vol 1 #420</i> (1988)						
In-panel Elements						
Serials	Modalities			Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?		N	N	N

<sup>289</sup> The last panel on p. 21 shows Batman's bare arm as he seals the entrance, which can be read as an implication of a bare torso in this single panel. However, if read in context, both the previous story arcs (e.g. p. 19) and the following pages (e.g. p. 22) run consistently with Batman dressed in the Batsuit. There is no panel depicting him taking off the suit either. Thus, the inconsistency in the colouring of the protagonist's arm is cautiously deduced as a drawing mistake, so the following discussion does not include this panel in the discussion; cf. Starlin and others, 'Ten Nights of the Beast', pp. 19-22.

		<b>COME!</b> LET UP PLAY OUT THIS BLACK GAME!	N	N	N
		WHY SHOULD I?	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	S
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Two larger panels on the top and bottom, and three parallel small panels in the middle; clear borders and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Peak (Arc: Batman attempted to kill the KGBeast.) Prolongation (Sub arc: Batman trapped the KGBeast.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		A		S

8\_Form 3.1.2-20 Batman corners the KGBeast, p. 20. Batman Vol 1 #420.

Source: panels 1-4, p. 21, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #420 (1988)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily presentation	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	A <b>FEW YEARS AGO</b> I WOULD HAVE JUMPED AT THIS CHANCE TO <b>TEST</b> MYSELF <b>AGAINST</b> YOU.	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	I	N
Panel 2	Verbal	BUT <b>TIME</b> HAS TAUGHT ME MANY <b>VALUABLE LESSONS</b> .	N	N	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	I	N
Panel 3	Verbal	THERE'S <b><i>NO REASON</i></b> FOR ME TO RISK MY <i>LIFE</i> , COMING IN THERE AFTER YOU.	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	I	N
Panel 4	Verbal	IT WOULD NEITHER <b><i>ACCOMPLISH</i></b> NOR <b><i>PROVE</i></b> ANYTHING WORTHWHILE.	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	I	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Four thin, parallel vertical panels with repetitive objects; clear border and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Peak (Arc: Batman attempted to kill the KGBeast.) Peak (Sub arc: Batman trapped the KGBeast.)				

Gaze relevance	Bodily presentation	Identification	Sexualisation
	N	A	S

9\_Form 3.1.2-21 *Batman leaves the KGBeast to die, p. 21. Batman Vol 1 #420.*

### 3.1.2.2 *Shifting alignments for spectating and experiencing*

In ‘Ten Nights’, the manipulation of identification and alienation contributes to narrative development mainly in two ways: spectating in a balanced power dynamic with alienating gazes and experiencing in an imbalanced one with identifying gazes. Similar to case 3.1.1, identifying devices are applied to build up the dramatic tension between the two characters with a sense of participation, while objectifying spectating establishes the power distance. Before the conflict between Batman and the KGBeast reaches its explosive Peak, the visual devices encourage the alternation of readers’ identification between being on either side of the fight and being a detached spectator. In Form 3.1.2-17, Panel 1 and Panel 2 are both bust-up portraits, respectively depicting the injuries Batman and the KGBeast inflicted on each other. In the first panel of p.17, Batman’s verbal recitation describes the two characters’ movements as ‘breaking off’ from a close-range exchange of attacks. The following two panels, namely, Panels 1-2, develop the resulting action of Batman’s description with a flat viewing perspective that fits the deduced relative position of Batman and the KGBeast. As both panels are drawn in a switch between visual monstration of the two characters, a mutual gaze is achieved between them from a first-person perspective, actively engaging readers in the narrative with a seeing-through surrogate. By filtering the spectating experience with a fictional alter ego, the images alienate readers from the observed object. The gazed-at character is put in a relatively lower power position to be a target of spectacular violence, and the subject-object alternation suggests an evenly shared power distance. Panel 3 pulls the focal point away from the characters and thus alienates readers from the previous engagement. From this panel onward, the readers’ gaze is directed onto both characters from an independent point of view to appreciate their performance in the next fighting arc, also implying a balanced dynamic between the protagonist and the antagonist. When the plot evolves to the Establisher of the protagonist’s killing act in Panel 1, Form 3.1.2-19, the gaze, projected from a distanced point at a low angle without merging with either of the characters, solely enacts invasive probing of the antagonist, precluding Batman’s superiority in the character dynamics in the Peak.

In the visual text, readers’ attention is balanced between the protagonist and the antagonist, no matter whether they identify with one of the characters or they act as a stand-alone

observer. In contrast, before the Peak on P. 20, the verbal texts tilt the centre of focus to the protagonist with monologues about his stream of thoughts. In Panel 1-3, Form 3.1.2-17, the verbal texts in rectangular boxes, i.e., Batman's psychological activities, follow the narrative development in the visuals to create a consistent narration by reporting the protagonist's immediate response to the fictional story. The verbal recitation emphasises (Panel 1-2) and expands (Panel 3) the information in the images with comments that especially reflect Batman's feelings, thoughts and observations, appealing to the readers' empathy and creating a sense of participation via the character.

Moreover, the verbal texts' expansion of information can fill or prolong the movements in statistical imagery. For example, the line '*neither of us has **caught our breath** yet*' in Panel 3 gives extra information about the character's physical feelings, which can hardly be reflected in the overhead far shot that does not show the characters' faces. By laying out a precondition of the KGBeast's attack, the time duration implied in Batman's observation prolongs the moment of striking, making him a consistent first-person narrator who not only aligns with readers by sharing subjective reflections, but also offers a constant verbal filter to shape the readers' understanding of the story. Thus, combining the verbal and visual modalities together, the pleasure of gazing in Form 3.1.2-17 should be re-interpreted within a consistent reader-protagonist alignment, creating a mixture of self-appreciation (Panel 1), enacting power (Panel 2) and bodily spectacles (Panel 3).

In comparison, during the Peak of the Batman-KGBeast conflict on pp.20-21, the identification with Batman is suspended while the narration is subtly delivered from mostly the KGBeast's perspective. In this section, readers' visual alignment consistently follows the antagonist from both the third-person perspective (Panel 1, Form 3.1.2-20) and the first-person perspective (Panels 1-4, Form 3.1.2-20). As for the protagonist, the previously established overall identification with Batman has been temporarily withheld since the third panel on p. 20, as the monologues in square boxes stop narrating the story's development until the end of the Peak. In all the panels after Batman trapped the KGBeast in a trap chamber and before he sealed the entrance, including Form 3.1.2-20 and Form 3.1.2-21, verbal elaboration on the narrative development is limited to Batman's aggressive reasoning about the KGBeast. In other words, the way readers to perceive the situation is the same as the antagonist — although via different modalities, since technically, the KGBeast should hear, rather than read, Batman's words — and thus the identification briefly shifts to leaning towards the antagonist. Putting readers on the opposite side of the protagonist with the use

of alienating visual-verbal devices, the Peak induces an experience of participating as the character of a weaker power position, which is key to establishing a narrative of horror that will be discussed in the next section.

### *3.1.2.3 Turning mystification into terror*

During the Peak, the bodily presentations of the protagonists and the antagonist contrast between revealing and concealing. Comparing the two male figures in Panel 1 Form 3.1.2-20, Batman's physicality lacks a figurative outline of a human body, while the KGBeast's body is presented as solid, masculine and with greater skin exposure. The protagonist's face is concealed with an unnatural shadow that, considering the limited level of shadowing on the KGBeast's upper body, is not a realistic depiction but a choice of visual art skills. The lack of face and body outline on Batman's representation suggests a rejection of the KGBeast's gaze, which is guided from his eyehole on the mask to his pointing left hand. Also, the readers' gaze toward the two characters is split by the composition, as the antagonist is placed closer to the focal point while the protagonist stands further away, half-hidden behind a door frame. The comparative size and distance differences attract the reader's gaze toward the more observable physical shape of the antagonist. When such gaze follows the indication of the antagonist's trajectory of looking, Batman's figure, which is fully wrapped in a full-length cape and lacks a physical shape underneath, rejects the readers' probing as well as the antagonist's challenging gaze. The comparison between what is known — the solid body of the antagonist, and what is unknown — an elusive figure covered in clothes, mystifies the protagonist as an approaching threat.

By far, rejecting gaze functions in the same way as the examples in 'Choices', but Form 3.1.2-21 illustrates a darker evolution of the narrative function of this visual structure. In Panels 1-4, Batman's progressively covered figures, in juxtaposed panels, develop the level of obscurity, suggesting that the gaze of the readers and the antagonist is gradually blocked and reaches absolute invisibility in the completely blackened image in Panel 4. As discussed, in this section, the readers' visual perspective is merged with the antagonist to achieve first-person participation. The rejection of the probing gaze is effective on both the antagonist and the readers, making the protagonist's obscurity — almost in an oxymoron manner — a visual reference to his opposition to the antagonist-reader unity.

As Grixti points out, uncertainty is applied in fictional horrors as a subconscious device to invoke dread and fear;<sup>290</sup> the concealed figure of Batman also heightens the horror of alienation. Compared to the exchange of gazes that guides the readers' perception from both sides of the conflict, the loss of subjectivity and initiative to acquire 'certainty' in Panels 1-4 is more absolute and definitive. The expansion of darkness in juxtaposed panels forms a consecutive progression, diminishing the chance of seeing and thus the chance of knowing. The protagonist's active manipulation of how he chooses not to be visible implies one-sidedness in his gaze, making the dynamic solely within his control in terms of not only the privilege of viewing, but also the pace of stopping the viewing. The spectators, including the antagonist and readers, are thus put in a passive position.

Thus, in Form 3.1.2-20 and 3.1.2-21, which represent the Peak of the entire issue, the gradual denial of seeing and being seen marks readers' complete isolation from the protagonist-centric narrative, and the dramatic tension is achieved with a layered power dynamic that denies the legitimacy of the opposite side against the protagonist. Verbally, the antagonist's challenge is deemed not worthwhile in the protagonist's lines (Panel 4). The vanishing of the protagonist's gaze, which is already mystified by the obscured visual representation of a hole in the cape rather than a solidly figurative image of eyes, amplifies the severity of such a rejection. The refusal of visibility, cooperating across modalities with the verbal lines, becomes a radical denial of the antagonist's power: the deprivation of his life. Aligned with the antagonist, the readers' fear is not simply enticed by the visual uncertainty of a character; it is the result of a sympathetic experience of being deprived of knowing and being denied the validity of existing.

In this section, another perspective for exploring the terror of obscurity in Batman's characterisation is the surprising similarity between the staggering alienation process and the pro-active otherness in the villains' character writing. As Coogan observes, despite the generic necessity of establishing villains as a reaction to the proactive design of their hero counterparts for dramatic tension, diegetically, heroes are reactive to villains' active initiatives, which justifies the protagonists' vigilantism that trespasses existing orders.<sup>291</sup> Batman's no-kill rule, which implies an oppression of the active subjectivity in enforcing powers, is often seen as a boundary that confines him from being as active as the villains he

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<sup>290</sup> Grixti, *Terrors of Uncertainty*, pp 54-56, 66-67.

<sup>291</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, pp 110-115.

opposes.<sup>292</sup> However, since Form 3.1.2-19, the power dynamic is implied to shift from reactive to proactive. Batman's verbal monologue, which suggests his intentional preparation to lethally entrap his opponent, cooperates with the voyeuristic presence of the visual focal point, creating an unsettling tension that preludes the shift of agency: Batman's initial effort to restrain the KGBeast's terrorist plot shifts into a deliberate decision to kill him. Following this turning point, in Form 3.1.2-21, Batman's dialogue suggests that his intent to kill is not a direct response to the KGBeast's threats and challenges (Panels 3-4). The mismatch between measure and countermeasure indicates that, narratively, Batman has taken over the dominant initiative to decide the resolution of this story arc, which shakes his legitimacy as a heroic figure because his active choice of lethal violence blurs the boundary of moral righteousness in the passivity of superhero vigilantism.

Visually, the active avoidance of being seen resonates with this proactive control, further eroding the protagonist's identity as a superhero. In Lennart Soberon's framework of constructing antagonists' villainy and uncanny otherness, which means the feature of being similar yet uncomfortably not belonging or conforming, is referred to as a commonly used psychological device to villainise a character in the narrative.<sup>293</sup> The gradual growth of shadows obscures Batman's physique as a human hero but keeps bat-inspired symbolic features, making the monstrous shadows an ominous symbol of threats — only this time they come from the protagonist instead of the antagonist. In 'Heroes and Superheroes', superheroes are described as inspirations to encourage readers to overcome fear by displaying 'the power of character and courage over adversity'.<sup>294</sup> When it becomes

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.; It should be noted that contemporary stories of Batman and affiliated heroes/antiheroes, represented by *the Batman Incorporated* series (2010-) and *Nightwing* Vol 4 (2016-), for instance, explore more possibilities in active, non-violent methods in crime control as alternatives or supplements to their endeavours as individual crime fighters, which expands the landscape of vigilantism beyond Coogan's description of binary choices of proactive killing or reactive defence/retaliation. This development in the superhero genre is very interesting to the philosophical or political analysis of the typologies of vigilantism, such as Worcester's discussion in *A Cultural History of the Punisher*. Unfortunately, it does not apply to the 'Ten Nights' cases, as its solution to the threat of political conspiracy and violence is still the old-fashioned way of physically eradicating the opponent. Also, for the main universe Batman's (surprisingly) long list of killing records over eighty decades, see 'The Complicated History of Batman Killing People'. Notably, most of the cases are consequently lethal rather than killing with active intentions; Kent Worcester, *A Cultural History of The Punisher: Marvel Comics and the Politics of Vengeance* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2023); Collin Colsher, 'The Complicated History of Batman Killing People', *The Batman Chronology Project*, 2024.

<sup>293</sup> Lennart Soberon, 'Vivisectioning the Villain: A Framework for the Analysis of Enemy Image Construction in Cinema', in *The Supervillain Reader*, ed. by Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), pp. 62–72.

<sup>294</sup> Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris, 'Heroes and Superheroes', in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*, ed. by Thomas V. Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2005), pp. 11–20, p. 16.

questionable whether Batman is a hero at all, his enactment of power stops being a comforting shield against the fear of the antagonist. Rather, he himself becomes the incarnation of fear.

#### 3.1.2.4 *Sexualising the power play in a political framework*

The Peak, on pp. 20-21, also marks a split between bodily exposing and concealing. Before p. 20, the bodies of both the superhero and supervillain are extravagantly depicted with spectacular, or even scopophilic, focal points. In comparison, on pp. 20-21, only the antagonist's body continues to be examined as a gazed object. Overall, the story establishes a context of bodily sensuality by emphasising the to-be-looked-at-ness (to borrow Mulvey's term) of physicality and physical experience. In the verbal text, pictorial and sensual wording — such as 'close-range brutality' and 'wheezing like a couple of old men' — is applied to magnify the dramatic intensity of the fights between Batman and the KGBeast (Form 3.1.2-17). A mutual exchange of power is implied in the emphasis on the enactor enforcing pain on the other's body, such as 'something to remind me which of us is armed' and 'a few licks of my own' (Form 3.1.2-17), providing an imagery description of both characters' physical actions and reactions.

In the visuals, both Batman and the KGBeast uniform designs include elements that emphasise their exaggerated, hypermasculine bodies, let alone the uniforms themselves being commonly considered a fetishised symbol of power.<sup>295</sup> Although, without skin exposure, Batman's classic blue and grey skintight suit reveals his bulky physique with strong shadows and half-tone shadings of the muscles (e.g., the chest and stomach in Panel 1, Form 3.1.2-17). Compared to the protagonist's cover-all uniform, which has been more or less normalised throughout his long publication history of comics, the antagonist's character design is more unusually decorative and revealing for a male character, implying the otherness in his identity. Firstly, visible body modification relates the KGBeast's monstrosity to scientific body horror. In Robert Genter's research on the Cold War culture and Marvel Comic, it is pointed out that the duality of hypermasculine monstrosity and scientific intellectual in the character design of Bruce Banner/Hulk, a superhero who gained the power of shapeshifting between a mild-manner scientist and a hypermasculine green

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<sup>295</sup> Dinesh Bhugra and Padmal De Silva, 'Uniforms — Fact, Fashion, Fantasy and Fetish', *Sexual and Marital Therapy*, 11.4 (1996), pp. 393–406, doi:[10.1080/02674659608404453](https://doi.org/10.1080/02674659608404453).

monster created from a lab accident, represents the public's concern of technological advancement and an essentialist anxiety about the loss of masculinity.<sup>296</sup> Interestingly, the character image of the KGBeast, who is physically enhanced into a monstrous warrior by fictional Soviet technologies, resembles Hulk's character anchor point, including the abuse of technology, ultrahuman physique and hypermasculinity. As Forms 3.1.2-17 and 3.1.2-20 show, the KGBeast's synthetic hand is coloured with a saturated red, the representative colour of the Soviet Union, and is shaped as a weapon that deviates from the appearance of a human body. The unsettling implication of disability and weaponised modification merges with the public anxiety about scientific advancement and ideological struggle, marking the KGBeast as an outsider compared to the 'natural' masculine body of Batman.

Secondly, the KGBeast's uniform also indicates abnormality in a sexual sense. As Forms 3.1.2-19 and 3.1.2-20 show, the KGBeast's uniform reveals so much skin that it is beyond the excuse of utility or references to Soviet aesthetics. It exposes his chest, arms and upper thighs, which is further highlighted by the large coverage of the long gloves and boots, strappy bodysuits with high-rise pants, and a full-face mask. In Valerie Steele's research on fetishism and fashion, excessive attention to certain clothing elements, including uniforms, bondage, masks, gloves, kinky boots and men's underwear, is both a signifier of fetishistic viewing pleasure and a displacement of bodily eroticism.<sup>297</sup> In the KGBeast's uniform set, his mouth-covering mask, long gloves, straps, Speedo-line shorts and thigh-high boots all reflect these typical elements in fetishised fashion — even, arguably, with a hint of homoerotic coding. According to Steele's discussion about the sexual appeal of male undergarments and the derived fetish clothing, bikinis on men subconsciously imply 'crotch-consciousness' and a visual reference to erotism that hugely overlaps with homosexual erotica.<sup>298</sup> Although it should be noted that the KGBeast has never been canonically written as a queer character, reading his bodily image with hints of sexualisation (and potentially homo-sexualisation) is in line with the widely established link between communism and homosexuality in the USA media, which served as demonised targets that were 'alleged

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<sup>296</sup> Robert Genter, "'With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility': Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics", *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40.6 (2007), pp. 953–78, doi:[10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00480.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00480.x), pp. 959-965.

<sup>297</sup> Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>298</sup> Steele, *Fetish*, p. 128.

internal threats to American life' during the Cold War era.<sup>299</sup> Nonetheless, the impractical, almost spectacularised exposure of the antagonist's body attracts the readers' gaze, reflecting the contradiction of emasculation and hypermasculinity described by Taylor: 'the reader is invited to ogle the bodies of these men in much the same way as the bodies of the women'.<sup>300</sup> Physically, the antagonist is drawn at least as strongly as the protagonist, but the sexualising gaze his outfit attracts complicates the interpretation of his power distance to the protagonist.

Thus, the KGBeast embodies the anxiety over an incarnation of otherness in multiple ways: a masculine challenger to the protagonist (body), an unorthodox presentation of sexuality (uniform), and an ideological invasion (narrative). In this narrative construction, the conflicts, especially physical conflicts, between the superhero and the villain become an entangled struggle for dominance in both gender and politics. Before the Peak on pp. 20-21, the power dynamic tends to be fluid and interchangeable, which is embodied in an equal share of the readers' gaze on both characters' bodies. Far to medium shots are often used to emphasise the dramatic movements of the characters' entire bodies, applying strong motion lines to elongate the time duration of the static depiction of postures (Panel 3, Form 3.1.2-17). Closer, elaborative depiction of muscular bodies is frequently loaded with invasive viewing. For example, Batman's shoulders in Panel 1, Form 3.1.2-17 imply an extension of his arms outside the compositional restriction. With the slightly higher angle of gazing, presumably in the first-person perspective of the KGBeast, the close-up imagery places the focal point within an opened-up brace of the protagonist. Such a subjective, immersive reading, which is achieved not by looking at the protagonist himself but by looking at the man he looks at, resolves the one-dimensional structure of prioritising the hero over the villain and creates a dramatic tension in the interchange of gazing and being gazed at.

On the other hand, a more rigid structure of power hierarchy in the caricatured crash of ideologies manifests itself in the fear ignited by the rejection of being gazed at. As discussed, the concealment of Batman's visual representation projects horror to the reader-antagonist spectator. Panel 1 Form 3.1.2-19, being a full-body portrait of the KGBeast, is drawn from a dramatic, invasive perspective. Initiated from an extremely low angle, the viewing trajectory almost starts unusually from the ground and shoots between the KGBeast's legs,

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<sup>299</sup> Newfield, 'Cold War and Culture War', p. 77; Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America*, pp. 52-66; Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 130.

<sup>300</sup> Taylor, 'He's Gotta Be Strong', p. 355.

grounding the centre of the image on the antagonist's exposed thighs and creating a scopophilic gaze that amplifies the implicit erotic hint in his uniform. When the readers' identification frequently shifts between complete alienation and identification with one of the characters, the excessive depictions of both Batman and KGBeast suggest that the appreciation of male physicality is uninterrupted by the identification shift. In Form 3.1.2-20, the KGBeast's bodily image continues to be under the straightforward examination of the readers and an implied gaze from Batman, building a link between exposure and a weaker power position.

The significance of constructing the correlation between concealment and power is not limited to the struggle between the two super-characters. In the story arc, three groups of characters act as representations of power entities: the president and agents representing the USA Government, the KGBeast as the Soviet Union and Batman as a third-party enactor of patriotism. On the one hand, the overall narrative arc arranges the representation of the United States to triumph over the incarnation of the Soviet Union, which was a frequently found narrative in the Cold War comics as a reflection of polarised international politics. In the superhero narratives as a political discourse, the villain is a counterpart of the hero and a personified embodiment of otherness 'against which the nation-as-hero must contend in order to maintain its existence, its virtue, its identity'.<sup>301</sup> On the other hand, the two superhuman characters are also placed above the governmental power agency. On pp. 14-16, the President's special agents were written to be murdered and discarded as the KGBeast '*marking his passing*' without a straightforward depiction of their fighting scenes.<sup>302</sup> The KGBeast's violence is visible and invisible at the same time, marked by the death of his opponents but hidden from the readers' eyes. The physical existence of the agents, who are perceived as ordinary men compared to the superhero and the supervillain, is reduced to collateral damage in the competition between the two giants. The terror of unseeable enforcement of destruction places the KGBeast in a higher power position, creating a hypermasculine union of super-characters above the common men. The two sets of power dynamics are unified in Batman's deprivation of the KGBeast's life,<sup>303</sup> symbolising a final

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<sup>301</sup> Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, p. 15.

<sup>302</sup> Starlin and others, 'Ten Nights of the Beast - Part 4', p. 16.

<sup>303</sup> To be more specific, a failed deprivation. The KGBeast returned to the DC Comic universe in *Robin* Vol 4 #14 (1991) — wearing long trousers this time.

victory of both the ‘correct’ party in 1980s USA comics and the ultrahuman bodies of the superhero.

### 3.1.2.5 Evaluation

To conclude, ‘Ten Nights’ uses shadows to block the readers’ gaze on the protagonist, which, in the context of reader-antagonist identification, complicates a supposedly polarised narrative of righteousness and evil in political propaganda. The story contains two layers of power dynamics: ordinary vs extraordinary, which is comparatively definitive and straightforwardly evident in the dead bodies of governmental agents; and the hero against the villain, which results in a more ambiguous stance. In the story arc’s development, male bodies are visualised in excessive depiction of combats with highly emphasised to-be-looked-at-ness and gendered bodily features, linking masculinity with physical prowess and violence. The antagonist tends to be further sexualised to evoke scopophilia gaze, which implies his otherness and villainy to accomplish a typical superhero narrative of binary division in ‘good-us’ and ‘bad-them’. When the narrative reaches the Peak of its conflict, the protagonist’s rejection of both readers’ gaze and identification endows him with otherness despite his status as a superhero and turns him into a character with a more obscured stance — ‘good-them’, who rules over the antagonist, the supporting characters as representations of ordinary people, as well as the readers. In this sense, the interpretation of masculinity is not limited to embodiment, but also a performance of dominance, and the protagonist becomes the ultimate winner in the hierarchy of masculinities.

## 3.2 Revealing

Developing how the dissatisfaction of gazing leads to the reinforcement of masculinity, this section will focus on the influence of active gazes on readily visible figures. In superhero narratives, a male hero’s physique tends to be a realisation of his becoming-a-hero narrative and a tangible embodiment of his extraordinary position among ordinary men. As Jeffrey A. Brown points out, ‘[t]he shift from “less-than-ordinary” to “extraordinary” masculinity is literally and symbolically written onto the hero’s body’,<sup>304</sup> which, despite being a synthesis of superhero films, also applies to the comics of the same genre. Comics, especially modern

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<sup>304</sup> Jeffrey A. Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016), p. 39.

mainstream (American) superhero comics, involve the art of the fantastic,<sup>305</sup> which, when reflected in bodies and physical performances, idealises superheroes' bodily images and the hypermasculinity they bear. Expanding on this observation, this section will explore three dimensions in the corporal embodiment and performance of masculinity: what the body looks like — physicality, what the body can do — prowess, and what the body experiences — mentality. Three examples are selected throughout the history of Batman comics, including a Golden Age issue that demonstrates superheroes' extraordinary physical capabilities, a more modernised graphic novel that contains more typical and visually accessible bodily images, and a revisionist miniseries that gives more nuanced affirmation of masculinity's supremacy with psychological explorations. From these three perspectives, normalised masculinity is constructed to be an inseparable part of the superhero identity and promoted as a desirable, idealised trait.

### 3.2.1 Superhero Origin in *Batman: Hush* and the Idealised Male Body

'It is impossible to overstate how excessively perfect male and female superhero bodies are in modern comic books', as commented by Brown in his research on art stylisation of idealised bodies in superhero comics.<sup>306</sup> As the first case about the visibility of masculine bodies in this chapter, the Batman origin story in *Batman: Hush* (originally published in 2002-2003, reprinted as graphic novels multiple times) is selected to re-emphasise Brown's argument and examine specifically how bodily perfection is constructed to be a normalised gendered trait. Pencilled by Jim Lee, Batman's aesthetically muscular and proportioned body in *Hush* gives a modern example of male body ideals, which originated in the Golden Age comics and became more noticeably spectacular with the development of art techniques, storytelling traditions and other comic-creating norms. In the DK's collection of *DC Comics Cover Art*, 'Hush' variant cover art is listed as one of the most iconic covers of the DC Comics publications,<sup>307</sup> illustrating the influence and representativeness of Jim Lee's artwork for the *Hush* series.

Running as a year-long event that depicts Batman's entanglement with a mystery stalker/supervillain titled Hush, the periodical version of this story arc spans twelve comic

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<sup>305</sup> Gresh and Weinberg, *The Science of Supervillains*, p. 2.

<sup>306</sup> Brown, *Super Bodies*, p.61.

<sup>307</sup> Jones, *DC Comics Cover Art*, p. 143.

issues of *Batman* Vol 1 #608-619 (2002-2003). When the monthly issues are compiled and published in collections in 2017 and 2022 to celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the arc's initial publication, slight visual revisions, new pages and a short introductory story about Batman's origin were added as specifically exclusive content to the graphic novel editions.<sup>308</sup> In the periodical titles, it is likely that Batman has been familiarised by readers; as for the graphic novel version in comic collections, it intends to rely less on intertextuality and appeal to readers regardless of their prior knowledge of this character. To present a complete story with a well-explained background, the collections added a retelling of Batman's well-known origin story, 'Who He is and How He Came to Be' (referred to as 'Who He is'), providing an overview of Batman's origin from his close family member, Alfred Pennyworth's perspective.

Focusing on this introductory story, the following analysis has little interest in the main story of *Hush* but focuses more on the narrative construction in the widely-known, almost cliché synopsis of 'Who He is': Young Bruce Wayne lost his parents in an escalated robbery and grew to be a crime-fighting vigilante in a Batsuit. Thanks to the rich records of the creation and revision of *Hush*, the analysis of Example 3.2.1 refers to the pencil and ink drafts published in the 'Extra' sections of the two anniversary collections and *Batman: Hush Unwrapped*,<sup>309</sup> which is an artwork collection of Jim Lee's pencil pages and sketches for the project.

### 3.2.1.1 Form analysis

Form 3.2.1-2 is extracted from the second to the fourth panels on p. 2 in 'Who He is' from *Batman: Hush 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, which is exclusive to single-release graphic book editions. In the extract, Form 3.2.1-2 contains young Bruce Wayne's reaction to his parents' death, his training and his inspiration to become a superhero characterised by bats.

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<sup>308</sup> Jeph Loeb and Jim Lee, *Batman: Hush 15th Anniversary Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2017), p. V; Jeph Loeb and Jim Lee, *Batman: Hush 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2022), p.II.

<sup>309</sup> Jeph Loeb and Jim Lee, *Batman: Hush Unwrapped Deluxe Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2018).

Source: panels 2-4, p. 2, the 20th Anniversary Edition of <i>Batman: Hush</i> (2022)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	<i>That very night, on the street stained with his mother and father's blood, he would make a vow to rid the city of the evil that had taken their lives.</i>	N	A	N
		<i>It was, at best, a fool's errand, or so I told myself.</i>	N	A	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<i>Using his family's wealth, Master Bruce sought out the world's greatest minds in criminology, martial arts, and the craft of detecting.</i>	N	A	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 3	Verbal	<i>He knew that criminals are, by nature, a cowardly and superstitious lot.</i>	N	A	N
		<i>In turn, he donned a cape and cowl and became a creature of the night, preying on those who broke the law.</i>	N	A	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 4	Verbal	<i>They now call him <b>The Batman</b>.</i>	N	A	N
		<i>But, I will always see him as that little boy, lost, struggling to find a way to make up for not being able to save his parents lives.</i>	N	A	N
		<i>And I...? I can only offer him something I fear he sorely lacks.</i>	N	A	N
		<i>Love.</i>	N	A	D
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Two horizontal panels followed by three thin vertical panels; clear borders and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Initial-Peak (Arc: Batman's origin)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	N		A		D

10\_Form 3.2.1-2 Batman's origin story, p. 2. Batman: Hush 20th Anniversary Edition.

The following image of Batman using a lassoed grapple gun on p. 3, initially the cover art of *Batman* Vol 1 #608, is conjoined to the introduction in the collection. Re-purposed as the last page of the introduction, its original verbal texts, including the title and credits, are taken off except for the penciler's signature. Form 3.2.1-3 analyses p. 3 as a single-panel frame with a consideration of its connection to the previous multi-panel pages.

Source: panel 1, p. 3, <i>the 20th Anniversary Edition of Batman: Hush</i> (2022)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions		N	S
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Single-panel illustration.				
Narrative functions	Prolongation (Arc: Batman's origin)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		N		D

*11\_Form 3.2.1-3 Batman flying across Gotham, p. 3. Batman: Hush 20th Anniversary Edition.*

### 3.2.1.2 Alienation in the separation between visual and verbal narrators

As explained in the Theoretical Framework section, in Groensteen's categorisation of text-image narrative devices, a unit controlling the progression of a story arc is categorised into three types: a visual narrator (monstrator), a verbal narrator (recitant), and a multimodal narrator (narrator).<sup>310</sup> This categorisation is significant to the analysis of how Example 3.2.1 addresses its potential readers, as both the verbal and visual texts discourage readers from

<sup>310</sup> Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, pp. 1–21.

identifying with the protagonist via different approaches. The verbal texts are narrated in Alfred Pennyworth's first-person perspective, making him a verbal recitant who channels the interpretations of Batman's origin. In the verbal texts of Panel 4, Form 3.2.1-2, Alfred emphasises the difference between 'they' who understand Batman as his superhero identity and 'I' who is more relevant to his civilian identity as the orphaned Bruce Wayne. This differentiation reflects the scriptwriter's perception of Alfred's unique position in his guardian role, which is close and caring to Batman in daily life but detached from his vigilante adventures. This interpretation is supported by the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collection's interview, as Leob discussed his insight into this parental figure's attitude to Batman, explaining that he saw his civilian and superhero identities as separate, loving 'Bruce — not Batman'.<sup>311</sup> This differentiation of Batman-Bruce identities implies an insider's knowledge, a boundary between the narrator and the audience, who are included in the 'them' Alfred mentioned.

Moreover, the monstrator lacks a visual representation, not only in the extracted panels, but also in the entire introductory section. The absence of a tangible visual image for the narration, plus referring to the protagonist as a third-party person under the monstrator's descriptions, alienates the readers from identifying with either Alfred or Batman. Thus, building a consistent voice-over for the verbal narration of the introductory chapter does not intend to establish a strong connection between Batman's subjectivity and the readers. Rather, readers are 'talked to' by Alfred Pennyworth instead of experiencing him.

In the visuals, the narrative development follows a first-person viewing experience, also independent of the fictional characters. Panels 1-4 in Form 3.2.1-2 and Panel 1 in Form 3.2.1-3 are both drawn from distant points of view that do not belong to any of the characters. The contents in the visual texts follow a chronological order, but the transition between panels is not constructed by repetitive objects with close resemblance, such as a string of movements. In Panels 1-4 in Form 3.2.1-2, Batman switches between different age groups and outfits, which means that the connection between the panels is sequential but not chronologically consecutive. Thus, they do not form storytelling aligned with the spectators' viewing, and the lack of a developing event suggests that the prologue chapter is not witnessed by a specific character, nor does it appeal to a sense of real-time engagement. Instead, by

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<sup>311</sup> Leob and Lee, *Batman: Hush 15th Anniversary Edition*, p. 11.

collaging the key moments of Bruce Wayne's growth, these panels perform more of an informative function to introduce the character's background.

In terms of the visualisation in individual panels, the viewing experience is also not participatory via an engaging lens or a specific character. Panels 2-4 in Form 3.2.1-2 are medium-to-long shots, characterised with vagueness in timing (Panel 2) and distanced focal points (Panels 3-4), suggesting that the spectators are not directly engaged in Batman's coming-of-age. By comparing the draft of Panel 3 and the finalised pencil page in Graph 3.2.1-1, we notice that the change in the viewing perspective moves the focal point away from the central line of the composition. This revision not only avoids direct face-to-face interaction between the character and the lens, but also creates more depth in the image and, thus, a larger space between them. Among all the panels in this section, Panel 1 features the only focused close-up, depicting the younger Bruce's tear-filled eyes in a symmetrical composition. The panel's visual arrangement places the protagonist's eyes at the geometrical centre, from a slightly higher perspective, creating a returned gaze from the character that expresses defiance and sturdiness within the narrative.

Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions

*2\_Graph 3.2.1-1 Sketch draft and pencil draft of p. 2 in 'Who He is', Batman: Hush  
20th Anniversary Edition, p. 314.*

On the one hand, the image contains multiple devices to imply a weaker power position of the protagonist, such as the overhead view with tears and a contrasting colour palette highlighting his parents' blood. On the other hand, the panel itself stands out from other panels because of its thicker white borders that give it a stronger presentation. Within the panel, the balanced symmetrical composition and dramatic, sharp application of shadows on the determined facial expression further emphasise the strength of the character. Judging by the difference between the shoulders and the nose in the two versions, the draft further illustrates that the published version tilts down the viewing perspective and centralises the eyes in the composition with a closer shot. Altogether, the visual devices create a tension between the temporary weakness and potential strength, forming an overlapping relationship with the determination of *'make a vow'* and the desperation of *'a fool's errand'* in the verbal

texts. Thus, this close-up viewing point should be interpreted as a validation of the monstrator's words rather than a direct challenge to the viewers. Instead of raising readers' identification or engagement, the viewing experience leans more toward an alienated observation that paves the foundation for later narrative arcs.

### 3.2.1.3 *Physicality as an incarnation of manliness*

In the extract, the correlation between power and the visibility of physical strength manifests itself strongly in the character's bodily presentation. In the interview of the creators included in the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collection, Loeb explained the change of Batman's body shape along the story's progression as a reflection of his frustration: 'Batman was getting smaller; he was being beaten down.'<sup>312</sup> The scriptwriter's comment on the co-dependent development in the narratives and the presentations of the protagonist's body illustrates how physicality can become a visible reference to his ability to control. Illustrating the same point, Form 3.2.1-3 depicts Batman in a deliberate superhero pose, prolonging the demonstration of Batman's muscular body in Panel 4, Form 3.2.1-2. The emphasis on the growth of physicality materialises Bruce Wayne's development into Batman, linking the maturity of the male body with his superhero identity.

The narrative across panels also approaches the coming-of-age story type with a clear presentation of body and strength. In Form 3.2.1-2, the verbal texts evolve around the contrast between '*the Batman*' (Panel 4, bolded as the source text) as a grown-up man and a '*little boy*' with childhood trauma (also Panel 4). Following the same topic, the visual representations of the protagonist also evolve from the boy in the Initial (Panel 1) to an adult Bruce Wayne developing into a manly figure in the Establisher and its following Prolongation and Peak (Panels 2-4). Next, in the visual of Form 3.2.1-3, which prolongs the Peak with further details of the superhero's current appearance, various artistic techniques are applied to emphasise the protagonist's body over other components in the image. As a full-frame illustration following p. 2, which is loaded with small panels, the sudden change

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<sup>312</sup> Technically speaking, the variation of Batman's body shape is also a result of the editorial management of a long-running periodical story arc (p. II 20th). Lee expressed his mild dissatisfaction with the inconsistency of Batman's appearance at the beginning of the arc and in the later issues. However, the art and editorial team agreed that an evolving look for the protagonist would collaborate more closely with the narrative and serve fans' interests (p. IX 15th, p. II 20th). Since the latest revision keeps Batman's appearance unchanged in its first chapter, Loeb's reasoning for how his body is presented remains valid in terms of narratological analysis; Loeb and Lee, *Batman: Hush 15th Anniversary Edition*, pp. VIII, IX; Loeb and Lee, *Batman: Hush 20th Anniversary Edition*, p. II.

between the number of panels in one frame slows down the pacing of panels and time duration, strengthening the visual strikingness of Batman's body in action.

Within panels, various visual presentation techniques are applied to guide readers' attention when the protagonist presents his physical capability. In the original publication, the scene of Batman flying across rooftops in Form 3.2.1-3 is not directly related to the narrative arc but was used as a cover art. In comic illustration practice, it is categorised as a symbolic cover that emphasises the protagonist's physicality 'in dramatic poses or engaged in a dynamic physical action'.<sup>313</sup> Being similar to the narrative function of Panel 4 in Form 3.2.1-2, this cover gives a clear definition of muscular physicality that symbolises strength and stability in the protagonist's powerful pose, the dramatic depth of perspective and the dynamic arrangement of graphic composition. More importantly, because of the contrasting luminance, colour palettes, and, interestingly, the drawing techniques, the inking and colouring differ in the character and the background and create a contrast to elevate the character's visibility over complicated surroundings. The character, as the main body of the image, is inked with strong division between light and shadows and coloured with a detailed marker pen effect. In contrast, the background's inkwork is linear and lacks boldly inked areas, and the light-shadow illusion is achieved by subtle hue variation in watercolour painting. Batman's solidly inked cape is intentionally stylised into pure black by omitting the structure and texture of the fabric, creating a visual break between the foreground and the background. This deliberate art choice is illustrated by the consistency in the pencilled page's note — 'x' mark means solid inking — and the finalised work (Graph 3.2.1-2). As the image gives the character a more striking and complicated presentation, his body becomes the viewing centre that is prioritised over other elements in the image.

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<sup>313</sup> Potts, *The DC Comics Guide to Creating Comics*, p. 71.

Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions

*3\_Graph 3.2.1-2 Pencil draft of p. 3 in 'Who He is', Batman: Hush Unwrapped, p. 5.*

As for the bodily presentation itself, Batman's muscular figure is intended to be closely examined by a designed viewing path for the readers' gaze to linger. In addition to the exaggerated muscle volume and body shape, Batman's torso is intensely shadowed in contrast to the more illuminated legs, which makes the thighs and calves even fuller and highlighted in the reader's gaze. In the pencilled page of this image in Graph 3.2.1-2, the shadows on the torso and under the two arms are achieved by a variety of values of luminance and parallel shading strokes. In the published version, the majority of these grey areas are inked into solid black, minimising the details and the sense of volume of these body parts, which are relatively far away from the lens. On the other hand, the illuminated parts on the protagonist's body, which are marked as the white areas in the pencilling work, are given extra details in the coloured version in Form 3.2.1-3. In the colouring work, marker pen painting refines the muscle structure of the thighs with slight variations in the saturation

and lightness of cold grey (see the volume of the calf muscles on the extended leg, for example). Changing the application of shadows and colour shifts the balance of details on the torso and the legs, creating a penetrating gaze shooting from the legs, into the crotch, and eventually progressing onto the torso. Further exaggerating the image's already intensive perspective depth, such a guided gaze travels from the body parts closer to the focal point and reaches the end of the depth marked by the blackened cloak, in other words, the torso and the face. Even more interestingly, the character's crotch area, despite being toned down in both shading and shape, is positioned at the axis of visual gravity, further reinforcing the penetrating scopophilic gaze and making the appreciation of the protagonist's body an active, dynamic act of spectaclarisation.

#### 3.2.1.4 *Avoiding homoeroticism in gazing at male bodies*

In addition to being centralised in both visual presentations and narrative construction, bodily images are also characterised by gendered traits. It is almost self-evident that Batman's appearance is male-presented, and in the visual text, the tension between invoking and rejecting scopophilic gaze further confirms manliness as a key feature in the protagonist's bodily presentation. In Form 3.2.1-3, the dramatic sense of depth is mainly achieved via the perspective distortion of the protagonist's body — if without considering the perspective depth, Batman's lower body is disproportionately larger than the upper body. As the legs and feet are enlarged, the focal point is positioned between the character's spreading legs, while his body is folded and distorted in a snapshot of motion that forms a triangular shape opening up and extending along the gaze. The relative position of the spectators and the visual implication of invasiveness amplify the gaze with the possibility of scopophilic pleasure. Compared to the detached flat viewing perspective in Panel 4, Form 3.2.1-2, the presence of the focal point in Form 3.2.1-3 is more pronounced, giving the act of viewing a man's body an underlying sexual relevance.

Compared to the enlarged torso and thighs, the depiction of the crotch, which is unproportionally small, follows the superhero comic convention that De Dauw identifies as 'the absence of the bulge',<sup>314</sup> whereby the visibility of the phallus is toned down to avoid sexuality anxiety surrounding appreciation of the male body. What further alleviates the potentially homoerotic potential in such a straightforward demonstration of the physical

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<sup>314</sup> De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits*, p. 37.

manliness is that the verbal texts consistently appeal to parental love, which contextualises the gendered body presentation in a same-sex family dynamic and avoids sexualising relevance. In Panel 4, Form 3.2.1-2, Alfred's monologue expresses his fatherly affection — 'love', as he explicated — to the younger men and re-emphasises that Batman's parents' deep influence on his growth. The emphasis on the narrator's guardian role gives Batman's origin story a direction that explores the unresolved complex of a boy within non-sexual character dynamics rather than more sexual aspects potentially implied in bodily images. As the masculine physicality is kept consistent in the visuals, the verbal texts about a family-like, non-erotic context form a compensating text-image relation with the visuals and define their scopes. Thus, the presentation of masculinity is steered away from homoerotic implications.

### 3.1.2.5 Evaluation

By retelling Batman's origin story from a distanced perspective and encouraging readers to appreciate the muscular physique, *Batman: Hush's* introduction section establishes the idealised body as a symbol of masculinity. In this narrative, a superhero manifests his embodiment of gender ideals via to-be-looked-at-ness, and homoerotic potential in the gaze is repressed by desexualising the underlying visual metaphor of invasiveness in the bodily presentation page. By accepting the appreciation of the protagonist's physicality while rejecting direct sexual references, the depiction of men's bodies serves as demonstrations of power and an illustration of masculinity.

### 3.2.2 'Crime Through the Ages!' and Hyper-capability

Case 3.2.1 provides an example of gazing at a male body for its own sake, and this section explores a slightly different emphasis in the portrayal of superheroes' bodies: bodies as 'evidence' for extraordinary capabilities. Examining CGI bodies in superhero films, Sabine Lebel observes that masculinity can also be embodied in physical performance with 'agility and beauty'.<sup>315</sup> Although Lebel believes that elegance in kinetics is not a part of conventional masculinity,<sup>316</sup> it is in fact a long-established norm in superhero masculinity as a demonstration of exceptional capabilities. To illustrate how physical prowess is constructed

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<sup>315</sup> Sabine Lebel, "'One Down the Boobs, Please!'" Reading the Special Effect Body in Superhero Movies (1)', *CineAction*, no. 77 (June 2009), pp. 56–68.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

as an essentialist embodiment of masculinity, this section shifts focus from modern comics to the Golden Age, using *Batman* Vol 1, #60 (1950), ‘Crime Through the Ages!’ as a case-study.<sup>317</sup> This issue’s main story arc follows Batman and Robin’s investigation in a theme park funded by Bruce Wayne, as the park’s construction plan was hijacked by ill-intentioned criminals. As a convenient background, the theme park allowed Batman and Robin’s adventure to happen in various spectacular settings in a limited length of an issue, such as a dinosaur habitat or a medieval battlefield. More interestingly, the flexibility in contexts also rationalises the story arc’s climactic scene, where Robin was almost crushed by an enormous statue of Batman. This fantastical plot amplifies the dramatic visual spectacle and highlights the tension between bodies valued for ego and appearance and those valued for capability. By presenting the superheroes under the threat of their statues as overly exaggerated self-images, #60 gives readers a layered reading experience to compare what should be read as a model of masculinity and what should not.

### 3.2.2.1 *Form analysis*

Form 3.2.2-4 contains two panels selected from p. 4 of *Batman* Vol 1 #60, in which Batman and Robin used acrobatic skills to rescue a construction worker in danger. This form illustrates how #60 sets its tone for presenting the superhero bodies in action. Similarly, Form 3.2.2-12 analyses the presentation of a talented physique in the first panel on p. 12, which calls back to Form 3.2.2-4.

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<sup>317</sup> Dick Sprang, Charles Paris, and Ira Schnapp, ‘Crime Through the Ages!’, *DC Comics*, *Batman*, 1.60 (1950).

Source: panels 1-2, p. 4, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #60 (1950)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	THE MARVELOUS ACROBATIC SKILL OF THE FAMOUS DUO FLASHES INTO ACTION...	Y	A	N
		GRAB HIS SHOULDERS, <b>ROBIN</b> -- IT'S THE ONLY WAY TO LIFT HIM OFF WITHOUT HURT-ING HIM!	N	N	N
		HAVE THEM SWING THE DERRICK DOWN A LITTLE LOWER!	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	PRESENTLY...	N	N	N
		HE'S SAFE NOW! THE WORKMEN ARE READY TO TAKE HIM WHEN WE ARE HOISTED BACK UP TO THEM!	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Square panels divided evenly with borders and gutters.				

Narrative functions	Peak-Release (Arc: Batman and Robin on a rescue mission)		
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
	Y	A	N

12\_Form 3.2.2-4 Batman and Robin in a rescue mission, p. 4. Batman Vol 1 #60.

Source: panel 1, p. 12, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #60 (1950)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	<b>BATMAN DEAD? LET US GO BACK TO THE MOMENT WHEN BATMAN HURTTLED DOWNWARD, HALF-STUNNED! SUPREME ACROBATIC SKILL GOES INTO INSTINCTIVE ACTIONS!</b>	Y	A	N
		CAUGHT IT! BUT IT NEARLY TORE MY ARM OFF!	Y	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Square panels, divided evenly with borders and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Peak (Arc: Batman escaped.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation		
	Y	A	N		

13\_Form 3.2.2-12 Batman uses acrobatic skills, p. 12. Batman Vol 1 #60.

From 3.2.2-5 and 3.2.2-10 are extracts that juxtapose the protagonists next to their spectacularised status, including the fourth panel of p. 5 and the last two panels of p. 10 respectively.

Source: panel 4, p. 5, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #60 (1950)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	...ALL THIRTY AGES OF EARTH'S HISTORY ARE RECAPTURED UP TO THE PRESENT!	N	N	N
		WE PUT <b>BATMAN</b> AND <b>ROBIN</b> INTO THE PRESENT-DAY SCENE, BECAUSE THEY HELPED US SOLVE DIFFICULTIES IN BUILDING!	N	N	N
		I WISH THEY HADN'T DONE THAT!	N	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Square panel divided with border and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Prolongation (Arc: Batman and Robin visited a theme park in civilian clothes.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	N		A		N

14\_Form 3.2.2-5 *Batman and Robin visit their statues, p. 5. Batman Vol 1 #60.*

Source: panels 4-5, p. 10, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #60 (1950)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	SEARCHING THROUGH FLOOR AFTER FLOOR, THEY REACH THE TOP FLOOR THAT REPRESENTS PRESENT-DAY GOTHAM CITY, AND FIND...	N	A	N
		THEY'RE NOT ON ANY FLOOR! IT'S AS THOUGH THEY VANISHED INTO THIN AIR!	N	N	N
		NOT INTO THIN AIR — BUT INTO THE <i>WALLS!</i>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	WHAT DO YOU MEAN?	N	N	N
		THAT ANTI-RUST PAINT--IT'S ONLY USED ON THE STEEL FRAME-GIRDERS! BUT THEY'RE INSIDE THE WALLS! THAT MEANS THE CROOKS ARE USING SECRET PASSAGES IN THE WALLS— AND WE'RE GOING TO FIND THEM!	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	I	N
Cross-panel Elements					

Spatial-topical parameters	Square panels divided evenly with borders and gutters.		
Narrative functions	Establisher and Prolongation (Arc: Batman and Robin searched for the antagonists.)		
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
	Y	A	N

15\_Form 3.2.2-10 *Batman and Robin perform detective work under statutes*, p. 10. *Batman Vol 1 #60*.

### 3.2.2.2 Two types of bodily presentations

Breaking down the bodily presentations marked in the analytical forms, *Batman #60* provides two sets of examples to differentiate idolised appearance from capabilities. The protagonists, namely Batman and Robin, are drawn as visual spectacles to represent superhero bodies with unusual strength and capabilities. Form 3.2.2-4 analyses the Peak of Batman and Robin's rescue mission, which is also the Initial of the overall story arc contextualising the statuesque versions of the two protagonists. To capture Batman and Robin's spectacular, almost unrealistic movements, Panels 1-2 apply two consecutive extreme far-shots that give a full overview of their aerial acrobatics in the images. Batman and Robin, who are suspended from the horizontal jib, are emphasised as the key viewing targets by the repetition of a focused composition and central objects. As was initially concluded by Sébastien Conard and Tom Lambeens' systematic review about time duration in comics argues, repetition slows down the rhythm of a comic and 'puts the reader at ease.'<sup>318</sup> The longer duration in Panels 1-2 eases the tension in the Peak of an action scene and draws attention to the visual spectacle of their body movements. Moreover, the shape of their physicality remains similar in the two panels but is depicted from different angles. Panel 1 has a viewing perspective lower than the protagonists, while Panel 2 is a bird's-eye view from above. This variation of graphic perspective elongates the presentation of the protagonists' physical extraordinariness, allowing a focused appreciation of the fantasy about superheroes' capabilities from different angles.

Considering the technical limitations of Golden Age comics, the presentations in Forms 3.2.2-4 and 3.2.2-12 should be read as physical spectacles even if the visuals are not drawn with dramatising art skills familiar to modern readers, such as strong shadowing,

<sup>318</sup> Sébastien Conard, Tom Lambeens, 'Duration in Comics', *European Comic Art*, 5.2 (2012), pp. 92–113, doi:[10.3Y67/eca.2012.050206](https://doi.org/10.3Y67/eca.2012.050206), p. 100.

exaggerated perspective distortion or focus lines (Compared to Jim Lee's artwork in Section 3.2.1, for example). In the visuals from both Forms 3.2.2-4 and 3.2.2-12, motion lines, a common comic technique to visualise the path of a movement,<sup>319</sup> are used to amplify the dynamic, speed and impact of movements. The verbal text, 'the marvellous acrobatic skill' (Panel 1), confirms that showing the spectacular movements in the bodily images is at least one of the functions of the visual, as visually demonstrating the skills mentioned in the verbal text forms an expanding text-image relationship that emphasises the repeating information in both modalities. Similarly, Form 3.2.2-12 illustrates such a full-body presentation in the context of demonstrating exceptional strength. When depicting Batman's escape from a deadly fall, Panel 1's verbal and visual texts overlap at the information of 'supreme acrobatic skill', making the long shot of the protagonist's entire body a focused illustration of his speciality. In both cases, gazing at the whole body of the superhero is connected with the appreciation of their ultrahuman ability.

On the other hand, even if the celebration of men's bodies and their capabilities is straightforward, humorous elements in exaggerating the already exaggerated superheroes' bodies subtly drive readers' appreciation of male bodies away from prioritising mere appearance. Forms 3.2.2-5 and 3.2.2-10 present a comparison between the protagonists and their statues as magnified egos. Form 3.2.2-5, as the first time Batman and Robin see their statues, exaggerates the comical size difference between the real characters and their replicants with compositional designs. In the visual, Batman and Robin appear smaller than the statues, even if they are positioned closer to the readers when the statues are further away from the lens. Shown in the bottom left corner, the protagonists turn their backs on the readers and are dressed in civilian clothes. In comparison, the uniformed statues in square heroic poses welcome the readers' gaze at the centre of the panel. The contrast between what is considered real and what is overtly idolised, plus the verbal words 'I wish they hadn't done that!', foreshadow the latter narrative development that reveals the undesirable nature of the statues. Form 3.2.2-10's Panel 1 also places Batman and Robin as small figures with dynamic movements in contrast to the statues' upright stiffness, illustrating a strong differentiation between the two types of appreciation of male bodies.

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<sup>319</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 109-117; Pratt, 'Narrative in Comics', p. 113.

### 3.2.2.3 *Identification as recognition*

In the panels that directly entice the gaze on the protagonists' actual bodies, including Form 3.2.2-4 and Form 3.2.2-12, readers' identification is rejected by verbal and compositional devices. Verbally, in the third-person narrator's lines, (e.g., 'the famous duo' in Panel 1, Form 3.2.2-4), the protagonists are constantly referred to by their superhero identities, with an emphasis on their extraordinary status, implying a distance between them as superheroes and readers as ordinary people. Visually, both cases are depicted from a distant perspective, where the focal point remains detached from the subjects, their actions, and their outcomes. For instance, Form 3.2.2-12, showing Batman nearly falling in a flat long shot, keeps the viewpoint removed from the character and outside the path of his motion, thereby reducing the image's immediacy and emotional impact on the reader.

The gaze on the statues is also significantly filtered with alienating devices. Panel 1 in Form 3.2.2-5 not only verbally rejects the legitimacy of the idolised bodies via the protagonist's comment, but also uses an extreme far shot to distance readers from the statues. Interestingly, this image's depth perception is not solely created by linear perspective, but also by overlapping. The image is separated into three layers of items: foreground (Batman and Robin), middle-ground (the statues) and background (side characters), visually setting a barrier between the focal point and the statues. Furthermore, the slightly tilted-up viewing angle of the statues suggests three vanishing points, which is contradictory to the one-point perspective for drawing other items in the image. The slight discrepancy in pictorial perspectives grants the statues an extra vantage over the protagonists in the bottom-left corner as well as the readers, as based on the flat view of Batman and Robin, the focal point is deduced to be at the same height. Next, in Panel 1, Form 3.2.2-10, the image is distorted with a fish-eye effect that bends the landline into a curve and magnifies the statues as the central objects. Depicted in an extremely long-shot view, the sizes of the statues are exaggerated with this lens despite the distance between them and the focal point, providing a spectacularised comparison with the small figures in the foreground. Observing these scenes as overview landscapes, readers are not encouraged to identify with the physical wonder of the statues but to understand them as alter-ego entities that are differentiated from the characters.

What creates distance between the protagonists' real and aggrandised bodies is the emphasis placed on their bodies in actions, reinforced through temporary identification mechanisms. When the statues are presented as the main body of an image, identification gaze tends to be

encouraged in or around relevant panels to align readers with the protagonists. In Form 3.2.2-5, the third line of verbal texts is placed in a curvy bubble to note that it is a thought instead of direct speech, pulling readers closer to the character by letting them understand his psychological movements. As Batman expresses his disagreement with the grandeur in their representations by thinking rather than convincing, his criticism is delivered to the readers as a relatable evaluation from a first-person point of view. Moreover, from the perspective of narrative development, understanding the humour in Batman's disagreement relies on the context that the protagonists' superhero identities are intentionally kept secret from the people outside their partnership. In the entire issue, the independent verbal narrator keeps separating Batman and Robin from their civilian identities as Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson. For example, on p. 6, the verbal narration highlights 'Bruce Wayne and his ward' as an alternative to 'their presence as *Batman* and *Robin*' when remarking on their superhero responsibility.<sup>320</sup> Thus, the knowledge of the protagonists' double identities, which is key to interpreting the comical comparison in the panel in Form 3.2.2-5, is established to be insider's knowledge and thus an implication of alliance, including readers in the admitted range of 'us' to the protagonists and strengthening their identification with these superheroes.

Form 3.2.2-10, on the other hand, illustrates a contextual identification adjacent to the panel that includes viewing the statues. From Panels 1 to 2, the framing transitions from an extreme long shot of small figures to a close-up that centralises the protagonists' heads and shoulders, suddenly pulling the focal point closer to the protagonists and creating a sense of participation. In Panel 2, the circled panel border and fully shadowed figures suggest tension and mystery, reinforcing the secrecy in Batman and Robin's reasoning and plotting in the verbal texts. By including readers in the protagonists' team with a close pictorial space and exclusive information, Panel 2 as an Establisher creates a sense of participation in the protagonists' actions and thoughts, preparing for the conflict in the Peak of the overall arc that reveals the status's threatening nature as a deadly weapon.

#### 3.2.2.4 Evaluation

Compared to the 'Hush' case, 'Crime' presents little reference to gender and sexuality, neither verbally nor visually. The evaluation of a man's presentation of himself, in other words, a performed masculinity, is achieved via the reader-character alliance. In this

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<sup>320</sup> Sprang, and others, 'Crime Through the Ages!', p. 6.

narrative, the viewing pleasure of superheroes' bodies is constructed beyond the association with spectacularised muscles and physiques. Rather, bodies with ultrahuman capabilities are prioritised as more appropriate models to identify with, building a relevance between masculinity and ability. When readers appreciate the male heroes' muscular shapes, what is perceived in their gaze is not limited to the aesthetics of bodily spectacles but the implication of physical power. Within the panels that directly encourage the gaze on male bodies, readers are alienated from the gazed-at objects, while in the context, readers are encouraged to identify with the protagonists and follow their judgment and experience. The identification and thus the recognition of a representation of masculinity happens not directly within the gaze, but in the narrative that justifies one type of representation over others.

### 3.2.3 Identification and Trauma Narrative in *The Dark Knight Returns*

In Section 3.2.1, Batman's origin in *Hush's* introductory story has been discussed as a contextualisation tool to introduce the character's identity, and the core narrative conflict centres on Batman's transformation from a powerless child to a man endowed with extraordinariness. In this section, the case-studies will explore a different version of this classic superhero origin, where the negative impact of the death of Batman's parents is more explicitly depicted. This section presents a different interpretation of this story in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986, referred to as 'DKR'), which focuses on Batman's psychological response and the long-lasting aftermath of his childhood trauma.<sup>321</sup> Depicted explicitly as a traumatic event, Batman's origin story in DKR is an empathetic re-telling of the original version in *Detective Comics* Vol 1 #33 (1939),<sup>322</sup> which is highly encompassed by pain and suffering that humanises the superhero with relatable emotional responses. In the following example, Batman's flashback is closely intertwined with his current predicament and paralleled by his climactic battle with Superman in Crime Alley, which is the place of his parents' death. By reminding readers of Batman's beginning point as a vulnerable child in such a scene of power struggle between men, DKR's Batman origin appeals to readers' empathy and encourages mirroring projection. The following example explores how the

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<sup>321</sup> DKR was first published in 1986 as a periodical miniseries and reprinted as a graphic novel collection on multiple dates and in various countries. Unless specified otherwise, the extracted examples in this section and the later section 5.2.1 are selected from the periodical version; Frank Miller and others, 'The Dark Knight Falls', *DC Comics*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 1.4 (1986).

<sup>322</sup> Bill Finger and others, 'The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom', *DC Comics*, *Detective Comics*, 1.33 (1939).

avoidance of bodily imagery in suffering evokes a subjective experience, making the protagonist's performance of masculinity more approachable without undermining his credibility as a representation of masculine ideals.

### 3.2.3.1 Form analysis

Form 3.2.3-34 contains the first eight panels of p. 34 in #4 of the DKR series, which illustrate the protagonist's final revisit to his superhero origin before sacrificing himself in the fight against Superman.

Source: panel 1-8, p. 34, <i>The Dark Knight Returns</i> #4 (1986)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	...HEALING QUITE <i>POORLY</i> , MASTER BRUCE.	N	N	N
		SHALL I PREPARE ANOTHER <i>STIMULANT</i> ? WHY <i>DELAY</i> YOUR VERY FIRST <i>CARDIAC ARREST</i> ?	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	Y	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<i>OLIVER-- MAYBE OLIVER WAS RIGHT... ALL ALONG</i>	N	Y	N
		... <i>CRAZY AS IT SOUNDS...</i>	N	Y	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	Y	N
Panel 3	Verbal	...BLOODY WALKING <i>HOSPITAL BED...</i>	N	N	N

		THAT'S <i>ENOUGH</i> , ALFRED.	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	S
Panel 4	Verbal	... <i>IN THE PAST WEEK, SEVENTY THREE VIOLENT ATTACKS ON WOULD-BE LOOTERS HAVE BEEN ATTRIBUTED BY WITNESSES TO THE BATMAN AND HIS GANGS...</i>	N	Y	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	Y	N
Panel 5	Verbal	... <i>YOU WERE ANCIENT...NOTHING COULD KILL YOU...</i>	N	Y	N
		... <i>BUT THE WAR...</i>	N	Y	N
		... <i>WHEN YOU CAME FOR ME... IN THE CAVE... I WAS JUST SIX YEARS OLD...</i>	N	Y	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	Y	N
Panel 6	Verbal	... <i>IT DID NOT BEGIN THEN...</i>	N	Y	N
		<i>NO...IT WAS... TWO YEARS LATER... WHEN HER NECKLACE CAUGHT ON HIS WRIST...</i>	N	Y	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	Y	N
Panel 7	Verbal	<i>...WHEN HE SHOVED HIS <b>PISTOL TO HER JAW AND PULLED THE TRIGGER...</b></i>	N	Y	N
		<i>...AND EVERYTHING MY MOTHER <b>WAS STRUCK THE PAVEMENT AS A BLOODY WAD...</b></i>	N	Y	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	Y	N
Panel 8	Verbal	<i><b>THAT NIGHT...BEGAN THIRTY YEARS OF HUNTING THIEVES AND MURDERERS...</b></i>	N	Y	N
		<i><b>...IS THAT WHAT YOU INTENDED?...</b></i>	N	Y	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	Y	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Small, evenly divided panels that lack gutters and panel outlines.				
Narrative functions	Orienter-Release (Arc A: Batman woke up from a coma.) Initial-Peak (Arc B: Batman's stream of consciousness)				
	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation

Gaze relevance	Y	I	N
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16\_Form 3.2.3-34 Batman's reflection on his origin, p. 34. *The Dark Knight Returns* #4.

### 3.2.3.2 Bodily presentation and alienation

Among all 8 panels in the extract, Panel 3 stands out as the only panel that contains visual elements to guide readers' gaze at Batman's body. The image adopts a golden ratio composition that highlights Batman's exposed torso as the central object, and the focus is further strengthened by the lightest colour value among all the major objects, which, in other words, means Batman's bare body is the lightest major object in the picture. Although Panel 5 also contains visual representations of Batman, the image is fragmented and heavily covered by a bat, which limits the visual content from presenting a bodily spectacle. Furthermore, the sheer contrast between Robin and Batman amplifies the presentation in terms of colour schemes (colourful vs pale), sizes (small vs large), exposure (concealed vs exhibited), and character design (young and agile vs old but steady). Miller wanted Batman's body to be physical evidence of resilience: 'He could take punches better than he could throw them. He could take any punishment you gave him and keep going',<sup>323</sup> which is clearly implied in the bulkiness of Batman's physique, the sophisticated structured under-armor and the bandage on the arm. By making a comparison between the physique of a teenage girl and a senior man, Panel 3 emphasises Batman's hypermasculine identity through the gaze at his bodily image.

Such a gaze tends to induce alienation instead of identification because of its narrative perspective of a third-person monstration. This panel intentionally stretches the distance between characters and readers. Judging by the position of Robin and Alfred, which is implied by the arrow of Alfred's speech bubble, Batman in Panel 3 is drawn from a third-person perspective that does not belong to any of the characters. This independent focal point gives readers a viewing experience that is not filtered by a dietetically existing point of view and thus assigns the reader as monstrators, the pictorial narrator categorised by Groensteen. The alienating effect of gaze makes the reader a witness who recognises Batman's masculinity, contrasting with the exploration of his traumatic memories from a subjective perspective.

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<sup>323</sup> Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, 30th Anniversary* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2016), p. II.

### 3.2.3.3 Identification, avoidance of bodily image and the trauma narrative

In Miller's script published in the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary collection, Bruce Wayne's reaction to his parents' death is described as 'Bruce knows that he has simply left the world, and will not return until he finds a reason to.'<sup>324</sup> This genuine, humane interpretation of Batman's origin story is reflected in how his memory of his parents' death is narrated. Compared to Panel 3's detached viewing point, the other seven panels make a significant effort to create an engaging reading, explicitly calling for readers' identification with Batman and related to his feelings about the loss. The first device that uses viewing points to raise identification is the alternation between narrative perspectives, more specifically, by centring Batman as the readers' lens, ears, and even brain, to process and experience the story. The visuals of Panels 1, 6 and 7 are drawn from Batman's visual perspective, which makes him a first-person monstrator by Groensteen's definition, and the texts in Panels 2 and 5-8 are monologues or mental activities of this character that set contexts or describe events, so Batman is also the recitant for these four panels. The perspective of Panel 2's visual appears to be relatively vague, since the electrocardiogram can either symbolise Batman's physical condition as being alive with heartbeats or visualise the bumping heartbeats he feels, so its function should be decided based on further recurrence in the following frames. Judging by the first-person perspective of Panel 2, the image is more likely to be the visualisation of the protagonist's corporeal experience, reinforcing the first-person experience of Batman as the surrogate fictional image and strengthening the reader's projection.

The perspectives of Panel 8's visual and Panel 4's text are decided mainly not by their in-panel content but by the context and the narrative arc. For Panel 8, its visual of a roaring bear is not linked to the previous panel's murder scene on the graphic level while, on the textual level, these two panels are in a consistent flow of speech by having Batman questioning Superman's legitimacy in his mental dialogue. Juxtaposed with Panels 5-7 and loaded with coherent texts, Panel 8 is likely to be naturally perceived as a development within the same arc and having a similar text-image interaction because of 'closure', the commonly shared cognitive process that encourages readers to see a series of images as an internally linked whole.<sup>325</sup> Thus, Panels 5-8 form an interpolation arc (Arc B) independent from the sequential narrative Arc A of Batman waking up. In Arc B, Batman's monologue

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<sup>324</sup> Miller, and others, *The Dark Knight Returns* (2016), p. 206.

<sup>325</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 88.

as textual texts traces back to Panel 2's text-image parallelism. In contrast to Arc A's clear chronological sequence of panels, the narrative structure of Arc B is comparatively fragmented and lacks transitioning panels. Panel 5 only provides a vague background of Batman's childhood experience and, without further contextualisation, the following two panels straight dive into the dramatic Peak of his mother's death. By jumping directly from the context into the conflict, the fragmented Arc B suggests that its panels are connected not by chronological order but by logical coherence. Judging by the consistency of Batman's self-reflections in the verbal text, the panel transitions in Arc B are likely to develop Batman's thoughts and memories, a flow of consciousness or half-consciousness restrained by association instead of chronology. Such application of the first-person stream of consciousness makes Batman not only a monstator and recitant, but also the narrator who influences the pace and sequence of Arc B's narration, allowing readers to experience his inner voices and images as if they are of their own.

Furthermore, in terms of spatial-topical parameters, the lack of gutters and panel outlines can blur the boundaries between what the protagonist knows and what readers read. Panels 5-7 and Panel 4 both have a shared panel format and size, namely taking 1/16 space of the entire frame and separating texts and images with different panel outlines. Panel 4 adopts the shape of a TV screen as the borderline for the image, while the text, just as those in Panels 5-7, is located outside the outline and does not have a clear outline. 'The non-frame speaks to unlimited space', as Eisner argues.<sup>326</sup> Thus, the texts which are not limited by panel outlines share the same white space in the entire frame, and the boundaries between them become vague. Even if in this panel the text and image need to be interpreted as a whole (image: news host, plus text: news host's report), the graphic segregation subtly weakens their connection, which is substituted by the visual correlation for all the outframe texts because of their similarities in the font and format and the lack of segmenting signposting. Under this condition, the news report in Panel 4 is no longer pure third-person knowledge exclusive to outside readers. Instead, its vague entanglement with Batman's train of thought blurs the line between what readers know as background information and what Batman knows as a character, reinforcing the readers' experience of relating to the fictional fantasy.

At the same time, these panels avoid direct depiction of the protagonist's body, which prevents readers from appreciating Batman's suffering from a distanced stance. As discussed,

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<sup>326</sup> Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 45.

Panel 5 blocks the gaze by presenting a fragmented, unfocused face as the visual representation of a character. A similar technique is used in Panels 6–7, where Martha Wayne’s murder is portrayed through a collage of symbolic elements, including a faceless figure, a gun-wielding hand, and a pearl necklace, which are all iconic in Batman’s origin story. In these panels, both the victim and the perpetrator are represented through enlarged body parts shown in an extreme close-up, rather than as fully depicted figures, creating a chaotic, impressionistic effect that avoids sensationalising Batman’s traumatic memory. As the correlation between identification and bodily presentation tends towards being mutually exclusive, the traumatic narrative of Batman’s origin is established to be intimate and relatable, yet it does not put Batman in a lower and emasculated power position.

#### 3.2.3.4 Evaluation

To sum up, the meaning-making elements and artistic techniques of DKR’s presentation of Batman’s origins create a consistent sense of identification. By adopting a close protagonist-centred first-person narration, the story prepares readers for the occasional withdrawal of self-projection in the following intensified conflicts. In this case, readers’ gaze is frequently directed through the identified character’s perspective to create a sense of imagined involvement, establishing a relatable narrative that confronts the lingering emotional weight of the protagonist’s past. Additionally, this case gives a brief glimpse of the alienation from self-projecting and the voyeurism in the narcissistic gaze. With only occasional shifts away from identification, the extract from DKR uses bodily presentation to reaffirm the protagonist’s masculine power, helping to resolve the crisis of authority introduced by the vulnerability in this trauma-centred story arc. In this way, the tragic element in Batman’s origin story grounds his embodiment of masculinity as an approachable ideal that accommodates readers’ self-projecting fantasy. In turn, the credibility of such embodiment is also validated in the gaze of his psychological world haunted by grief, as Chris Knowles concludes, ‘[...] Wayne needs this demonic spiritual power to regain his manhood.’<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Chris Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (Cape Neddick: Weiser Books, 2007), p. 150.

### 3.3 Concluding Remarks

This chapter examines five case-studies that construct and reinforce superhero masculinity, all contributing to establishing Batman's authority and normalising a specific vision of dominant masculinity.

The first two case-studies, *Choices* (1993) and *Ten Nights of the Beast* (1988), discuss how an imbalanced power structure is forged in obscurity. In the former case, a rejection of gaze, which is achieved visually through stylised shadows, denies both the antagonists' and readers' attempts to objectify him, transforming concealment into a marker of strength. Here, dominance is articulated not through visibility but through the privilege of invisibility, namely the ability to control who looks and who is looked at. Readers' temporary alignment with the villain's terror is ultimately redirected into reinforcing Batman's mystique, while the viewing experience that encourages readers' identification with the protagonist allows them to share the high-power position of the superhero. In the second case, *Ten Nights* locates Batman's authority in moral ambiguity and political context, alienating him further from the readers and positioning all the spectators — readers and the antagonist alike — under his superiority. Published during the Cold War, it ties his vigilantism to right-wing patriotism, but also complicates binaries of good and evil by pitting him against both Soviet villainy and impotent U.S. state forces. The hyper-visibility of male bodies in violent combat underscores masculinity as physical prowess, yet Batman distances himself from mere corporeal spectacle through the strategic use of shadows. In doing so, he transcends other masculinities, including the sexualised villain, the powerless agents, and even the patriotic everyman, to embody a higher order of masculine dominance defined by both control and exceptionality. By examining the invisibility in comics, a type of predominantly visual-based text, these two cases not only reconfirm the link between viewing and power, but also illustrate that power distance is not determined solely by a single element in texts but needs systematic analysis on the presentation, contexts and narratives.

The following three cases, including *Hush* (2002–2003), 'Crime Through the Ages!' (1950) and DKR (1986), identify typical characteristics in the norms of superhero masculinity, including bodily perfection, physical prowess and resilience within vulnerability. In the first example, Jim Lee's hyper-idealised musculature normalises the male superhero body as an aspirational standard. Batman's physique is designed for aesthetic admiration while carefully desexualised, directing the gaze toward authority rather than eroticism. By

inducing alienating gazes on bodily images as objective confirmations, Batman's performance of masculinity is seen as an innate physical feature and an embodiment of control, capability, and resilience. The second example demonstrates an earlier mode of encoding masculinity, privileging capability over mere appearance. The narrative uses spectacular settings to contrast a hollow self-image with authentic physical prowess, situating masculinity as a function of extraordinary ability rather than vanity. In this way, the superhero body becomes not just an object of spectacle, but also the 'evidence' of legitimacy in a hierarchy of masculinities. Finally, DKR adds psychological depth to the masculine ideal, foregrounding trauma to highlight the superhero's resilience and endurance in a relatable manner. Rather than undermining Batman's masculine authority, vulnerability in his origin story is reworked into the foundation of his mythos as a source of the man's dominance. By inviting empathetic identification with Bruce Wayne's suffering, the narrative humanises him while simultaneously reasserting his authority as one who has transcended pain to reclaim power. Trauma thus becomes a masculine credential, transforming weakness into a source of enduring strength.

To conclude, these examples show that dominant masculinity in Batman comics is constructed through a delicate interplay of concealment and spectacle, power and vulnerability, patriotism and autonomy. Batman's masculinity is never fixed in a single attribute, whether physical perfection, strategic invisibility, or emotional resilience, but rather reinforced through his ability to transcend and reorder hierarchies of men.

## Chapter 4 Violence, Exposure and Invasion in Gaze: The Duality Force of Gazing

Among all the condemnations of comics' negative cultural influence, nudity and violence are two frequent — though often heavily censored and self-censored — elements that are repeatedly targeted in moral-panic literature. The intellectual criticism of comics in the 1940s-50s, such as Wertham's *Seduction*, Geoffrey Wagner's *The Parade of Pleasure*, and Gershon Legman's *Love and Death*, as Jean-Paul Gabilliet concludes, represents public concerns about such culturally sensitive themes.<sup>328</sup> Such backlashes against comics prepared a receptive ground for the establishment of the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) in 1948 and the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) in 1954. Compared to ACMP's smaller scale of 6 publishers, CMAA was a large self-regulated association consisting of 26 comic publishers, including DC Comics, which created and administered a self-censorship body, the Comic Code Authority (CAA), for reviewing and approving content that was deemed 'appropriate'. ACMP's self-censorship had general guidelines against nudity and glorified or pleasurable violence.<sup>329</sup> More accurately composed, the *Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America*, commonly known as the Comic Code (1954, revised in 1971 and 1989), covered the entire production and distribution streamline, including both editorial and advertising matters. The Comic Code systematically restricted nudity and excessive violence with strong, specific wording: 'Nudity in any form is prohibited', and '[s]cenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated', for instance.<sup>330</sup> Unlike the over-generalising impression of Wertham and CCA's devastating influence, CCA historically did not ubiquitously impact comic publishers of various scales and themes; since the rise of the direct market in the 1980s, its control over controversial content had significantly declined, and it ceased to be effective after Marvel, DC Comics,

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<sup>328</sup> Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*; Geoffrey Atheling Wagner, *Parade of Pleasure: A Study of Popular Iconography in the U.S.A.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1955); Gershon Legman, *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship* (Brooklyn: Hacker Art Books, 1963); Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), pp. 227-233.

<sup>329</sup> 'Code of the Association of Comic(COMICS?) Magazine Publishers (1948)', in Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, p. 318.

<sup>330</sup> 'Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America (1954)', in Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, p. 321.

and Archie Comics consecutively left the association.<sup>331</sup> However, as the most influential censorship entity in the history of USA comics, CCA's strong stance indicates two things: on the one hand, violence and nudity are, or at least have been, exceptionally common and popular; on the other hand, compared to the 'safe cards' examined in Chapter Three, they are more unsettling, under debate, and potentially subversive.

Surprisingly, beyond discussions of media effect and censorship, violence in superhero comics has received limited scholarly attention, particularly when the violence is directed at, rather than enacted by, male superheroes or inflicted on female characters. The former is illustrated by 'Violence in the American Imaginary', in which Menaka Philips categorises superhero violence based on agency and justification, pointing out that straight white male characters tend to monopolise the privilege of embodying transcendental, unrestricted violence without compromising their power and right, while superheroines and non-white superheroes more commonly suffer from relevant repressions.<sup>332</sup> The latter topic, gendered violence and visuality, is well-represented by relevant research on *The Killing Joke* (Alan Moore, 1988).<sup>333</sup> As one of the most well-articulated and prestigious Batman stories, *The Killing Joke* controversially exploits sexualised graphic violence against Batgirl as a plot catalyst, which has been sharply analysed in multiple academic essays, such as 'Batgirl: Continuity, Crisis and Feminism' in *Many More Lives of the Batman*, 'The Bat-Woman: Caped Crusaders and Costumed Feminism' in *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity*, and *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*.<sup>334</sup> Both research focuses reveal the relevance of gender identities in the presentation of violence and the imbalanced dynamics that enforce hegemonic masculinity via fictional physical aggression. As the connection of gendered performance and violence has been explored when male characters possess a dominant position, how this power struggle performs in a reversed situation, namely, superheroes as victims, will be explored in the following section.

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<sup>331</sup> Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>332</sup> Menaka Philips, 'Violence in the American Imaginary: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Superheroes', *American Political Science Review*, 116.2 (2022), pp. 470-83, doi:[10.1017/S0003055421000952](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000952).

<sup>333</sup> Alan Moore, Brian Bolland, and John Higgins, *Batman: The Killing Joke* (New York: DC Comics, 1988).

<sup>334</sup> Will Brooker, 'Batgirl: Continuity, Crisis and Feminism', in *Many More Lives of the Batman*, ed. by Roberta Pearson, William Uricchio, and Will Brooker (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), pp. 178-202; Brown, *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity*, pp. 104-27; Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2016).

As another taboo, superhero nudity is more frequently researched, specifically because of its paradoxical nature in costumed nakedness. As Friedrich Weltzien in ‘Masque-ulinities’ argues, superheroes’ masculinity relies so much on the transformation and disguise of suits that no ‘real man’, namely the actual bodily presence, can be uncovered underneath.<sup>335</sup> Similarly, Dru H. Jeffries in ‘From the Top of the Cowl to the Tip of the Cape’, Brownie and Graydon in *The Superhero Costume*, David Coughlan in ‘The Naked Hero and Model Man’, all point out that the ideal of male nudity in superhero comics is widely presented not by bodies themselves but by bodily shaped costumes that visually resemble nudity, emphasise a masculine physical outline and loaded with identity signifiers — eye-catching colours and attires as ‘a kind of “war paint”’.<sup>336</sup> In other words, nakedness is visualised through tightly rendered costumes that erase the boundary between corporeality and clothing. The result, as Michael Chabon comments, is an ‘impossible object’ constructed by the fiction of paint, and what Michael Carter describes as a condition of ‘clothed nudity’: the superhero is at once fully dressed and yet visually nude, fusing his ‘inner form’ with his ‘outer appearance’.<sup>337</sup> The continuing popularity of such skin-tight costumes in the superhero genre has its roots in realistic practicality, such as the long-standing industrial requirement for short comic production circles, and the invention of certain synthetic fabrics in the 1950s that made the paint-on suits more accessible in live action.<sup>338</sup> Thus, male nudity in superhero stories, paradoxically, often emerges through the concealment of suits and costumes, which makes the actual nudes relatively rare cases to study.

This chapter has four case-studies, which are organised as two comparative groups focusing on violence and nudity, respectively. In the first group, the first case uses simplification and stylisation to alleviate the empathetic impact of violent scenes, while the second case applies comical exaggeration to emphasise the visual shock in physical conflicts. The second group discusses the depictions of male nudity, providing one example of empowering exposure

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<sup>335</sup> Weltzien, ‘Masque-Ulinities’.

<sup>336</sup> Dru H. Jeffries, ‘From the Top of the Cowl to the Tip of the Cape: The Cinematic Superhero Costume as Impossible Garment’, *Cinephile: The University of British Columbia’s Film Journal*, 9.2 (2013), pp. 30–37, p. 33; Brownie and Graydon, *The Superhero Costume*, p. 17; David Coughlan, ‘The Naked Hero and Model Man: Costumed Identity in Comic Book Narratives’, in *Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture: Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home*, ed. by Lisa M. DeTora (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), pp. 234–52.

<sup>337</sup> Bolton and Chabon, *Superheroes*, pp. 16-18; Michael Carter, ‘Superman’s Costume’, *Form/Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Design and the Built Environment*, 31.4 (2000), pp. 26-41.

<sup>338</sup> Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World’s Greatest Comics* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1991), p. 11; Geczy and Karaminas, *Fashion and Masculinities in Popular Culture*, pp. 120-30.

and another about nudes and vulnerability. Presenting contrasting pairs of rendering strategies, these case groups show how power structures shape whether the protagonist's display of dominant masculinity is reinforced or contested. By presenting the possibility of challenging classic superheroes' masculinity, this chapter illustrates that superheroes are not self-evident incarnations of hypermasculinity, but also demasculinised objects serving for readers' viewing pleasure.

## 4.1 Bodies Under Attack: Making and Unmaking Indestructible Bodies

Specifically examining the violence enacted on the superhero bodies, Batman comics illustrate two opposite directions. On the one hand, stylised violence is a common approach to 'sanitise' the action scenes, which was especially prominent when CCA censorship had stronger control over the comic industry before the 1980s.<sup>339</sup> Stylised violence refers to the depiction of violent acts in a way that emphasises symbolic effect rather than threatening realism, often softening or distancing the impact of physical harm with artistic choices such as generalisation, simplification and omission. In earlier comics, especially the Golden and Silver Age comics, it is rare to visually observe the protagonists dramatically suffering from pain and discomfort during a fight or when they fall into compromised situations, even if both the verbal texts and plots suggest so. The popularity of teenage sidekicks coincides with the sanitisation of violence, especially illustrated by how Batman and Robin's dynamic pushed the Batman series into a more educational, child-friendly tone of narrative.<sup>340</sup> On the other hand, Batman stories featuring sensationally violent scenes — or say graphic violence — also hold an important share in his overall characterisation. Graphic violence is the explicit representation of physical harm, injury, or death in visual media, often emphasising realistic details such as blood, gore, or bodily trauma, with the intent to confront the audience with the visceral effects of violence. In an interview with Christopher Sharrett, Frank Miller explicitly expresses his interest in this aspect of Batman, commenting that 'Batman is an extremely violent character.'<sup>341</sup> Although Miller's preference might not be universal, it is nonetheless a representative opinion of a popular approach to presenting Batman in fights,

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<sup>339</sup> Terrence R. Wandtke, *The Meaning of Superhero Comic Books* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), pp. 109-10.

<sup>340</sup> Eaton, 'A Superhero for the Times', p. 34.

<sup>341</sup> Sharrett, 'Batman and the Twilight of the Idols', p. 37.

which is also observed by Brooker in *Hunting the Dark Knight*.<sup>342</sup> In this interpretation of Batman, the enjoyment of fictional violence is in sheer contrast to the subtle avoidance of visuals about physical injuries in stylised violence, and the following two examples will examine how this different stance influences the presentation of the protagonist's masculinity.

#### 4.1.1 Stylised Violence in 'Enemy No. 1'

Stylised violence is a common method to 'tone down' the intensity of violence when comic book superheroes are assaulted by villains. To explore the discrepancy between contextually established suffering in the narrative and the lack thereof in visual presentations, this section will analyse the depiction of violence and lethal dangers in 'Enemy No. 1', *Batman Vol 1 #29* (1945).<sup>343</sup> This issue tells the story of Batman and Robin taking down a criminal lord named Adam Frank, who attempted to capture the dynamic duo and made them into collectable trophies. As a typical Golden Age comic, #29 has a linear and focused narrative arc that contains repetitive temporary progress and defeats until the final conflict. #29's narrative structure, humorously described in comic writing practice as 'one-damn-thing-after-another structure', as O'Neil phrases, is commonly applied in early comics as a template structure.<sup>344</sup> This type of plot arrangement is characterised by an accumulation of multiple mini story arcs happening one after another until a larger event as the climactic conclusion, allowing #29 to accommodate multiple minor events involving comparatively minor physical conflicts and a major crisis with more serious violence. Through this example, it is illustrated that the viewing experience of the protagonists' suffering is intentionally toned down and alienated from identification to avoid a sense of empathetic realness, which resolves the potential that the protagonists' masculine presentations are challenged by setbacks in combat.

##### 4.1.1.1 Form analysis

Form 4.1.1-4 includes the last panel on p.4, which presents Batman and Robin's temporary advantage over the antagonists. It prepares a context for the antagonist's comical

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<sup>342</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, pp. 129-30.

<sup>343</sup> Bill Finger and others, 'Enemy No. 1', *DC Comics*, *Batman*, 1.29 (1945).

<sup>344</sup> O'Neil, *The DC Comics Guide to Writing Comics*, p. 50.

counterattack in the first three panels on the next page, recorded in Form 4.1.1-5. These two forms offer contrasting visual representations of similar fighting scenes from the same fight, one in which the protagonists hold the upper hand, and one in which the antagonists do.

Source: panel 6, p. 4, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #29 (1945)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	FRIGHTENED SWITCH-BOARD GIRLS WATCH A FAST AND FURIOUS BATTLE ...	Y	A	S
		THIS WILL HELP YOU HEAR THE BIRDIES SING!	Y	N	N
		TRY A LONG-DISTANCE WIRE CHUM!	Y	N	N
		I'M GLAD NOBODY EVER HITS A FELLOW WITH GLASSES! THINK I'LL PLAY A LITTLE GAME!	N	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Small panels with clear borders and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Peak (Arc: Batman and Robin assaulted mobsters.) Orienter (Arc: mobsters used marbles to attack Batman and Robin.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		A		N

17\_Form 4.1.1-4 *Batman and Robin fight mobsters, p. 4. Batman Vol 1 #29.*

Source: panel 1-3, p. 5, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #29 (1945)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	I ALWAYS LIKED TO PLAY WITH MARBLES! BUT I NEVER HAD SUCH A BEAUTIFUL SMOOTH FLOOR!	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	DON'T STEP ON THEM, BOSS!	N	N	N
		I'M WATCHING, FOUR-EYES!	N	N	N
		TIME FOR SAM TO HELP US GET OUT OF HERE!	N	N	N
	Multi	WHA...?	N	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 3	Verbal	WHILE THE DYNAMIC DUO SPRAWLS HELPLESSLY...	Y	A	N
		THEY CAN'T GET AWAY THROUGH THE WINDOW! WE'RE FOUR FLIGHTS UP!	N	N	N
		THIS IS RIGHT UP MY ALLEY! STEP OUT FIRST BOSS!	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Bordered small panels except for Panel 1.				

Narrative functions	Initial-Release (Arc: mobsters used marbles to attack Batman and Robin.)		
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
	Y	A	N

18\_Form 4.1.1-5 Mobsters attacked Batman and Robin with marbles, p. 5. *Batman Vol 1 #29*.

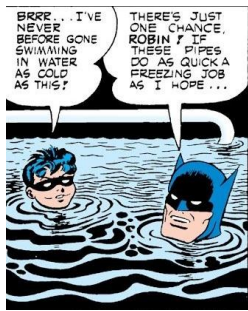

Form 4.1.1-10 and Form 4.1.1-11, respectively containing the 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> panels on p. 10 and 1<sup>st</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> on p. 11, cover the entirety of the story arc about the antagonists' last attempt to hurt Batman and Robin. In Form 4.1.1-10, Batman and Robin are captured and forced to step into a storage freezer, and in Form 4.1.1-11, they manage to escape by taking advantage of the formation of ice as the water freezes and breaking through the door.

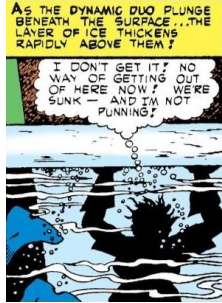


Source: panel 4-7, p. 10, <i>Batman Vol 1 #29</i> (1945)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	LATER, IN A SMALL BUILDING DESERTED FOR THE NIGHT...	N	N	N
		CHALK UP ANOTHER FIRST TO MY CREDIT, <b>BATMAN!</b> YOU AND <b>ROBIN</b> ARE FAMOUS... I'M THE FIRST ONE TO THINK OF REALLY <u>PRESERVING</u> YOU FOR POSTERITY!	Y	N	N
		THANKS, WE CAN ORESERVE OURSELVES!	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Panel 2	Verbal	NOT THE WAY I INTEND TO DO IT! THE BUILDING IS USED FOR QUICK-FREEZING FOODS! I'LL FILL IT WITH WATER...AND LET IT FREEZE YOU!	Y	N	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	N	N
Panel 3	Verbal	I'VE REMOVED YOUR ROPES SO YOU'LL LOOK MORE NATURAL WHEN YOU'RE FROZEN! GOOD-BYE, BATMAN! I'VE GOT ANOTHER FIRST TO VISIT TONIGHT!	Y	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Panel 4	Verbal	WATER RISES OMINOUSLY ABOUT THE CAPED FIGURES...	N	I	N
		<b>UGH!</b> IT WON'T GIVE!	N	A	N
		NO USE, <b>ROBIN!</b> THIS DOOR IS A LITTLE TOO STRONG FOR US!	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	N	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Small panels with clear borders and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Initial-Peak (Arc: Adam Frank captured and threatened Batman and Robin.) Orienter-Initial (Arc: Batman and Robin escaped from a freezer.)				

Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
	Y	A	N

19\_Form 4.1.1-10 The villain forces Batman and Robin to be contained in a freezer, p. 4. Batman Vol 1 #29.

Source: panel 1-6, p. 11, <i>Batman Vol 1 #29</i> (1945)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	BRRR...I'VE NEVER BEFORE GONE SWIMMING IN WATER AS COLD AS THIS!	N	N	N
		THERE'S JUST ONE CHANCE, <b>ROBIN!</b> IF THESE PIPES DO AS QUICK A FREEZING JOB AS I HOPE...	N	N	N
	Visual		Y	N	N
Panel 2	Verbal	THEY'RE QUICK, ALL RIGHT! I CAN FEEL ICE CRUSHING AGAINST MY CHEST ALREADY!	N	N	N
		THAT'S BECAUSE IT FORMS AT THE TOP FIRST! HURRY, ROBIN... DIVE BELOW THE SURFACE AND SWIM TOWARD THE DOOR!	N	N	
	Visual				
Panel 3	Verbal	AS THE DYNAMIC DUO PLUNGE BENEATH THE SURFACE...THE LAYER OF		N	

		ICE THICKENS RAPIDLY ABOVE THEM!			
		I DON'T GET IT! NO WAY OF GETTING OUT OF HERE NOW! WE'RE SUNK — AND IM NOT PUNNING	Y	I	N
	Visual		N	A	N
Panel 4	Verbal	THERE'S THE DOOR, BUT WE CAN'T GET THROUGH! AND I CAN'T HOLD MY BREATH ANY LONGER! THIS IS THE END...	N	I	N
	Visual		N	A	N
Panel 5	Verbal	SUDDENLY... WITH A GRINDING ROAR...	N	I	N
	Visual		Y	A	N
Panel 6	Verbal	WHEW... I SEE NOW! WATER EXPANDS AS IT FREEZES, AND DEVELOPS GREAT FORCE!	N	A	N
		RIGHT! MANY A SHIP HAS BEEN CRUSHED BY ICE IN THE SAME WAY!... NOW, TO SEE ABOUT FRANK.. HE SAID HE WAS GOING TO	N	A	N

		ANOTHER "FIRST"... BUT IT'S TOO LATE...			
	Visual		N	N	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Small panels with clear borders and gutters; Panel 3 has a round border and a yellow ring within the panel box.				
Narrative functions	Prolongation-Peak (Arc: Batman and Robin escaped from a freezer.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation		
	Y	A	N		

20\_Form 4.1.1-11 Batman and Robin escape from the freezer, p. 11. Batman Vol 1 #29.

#### 4.1.1.2 Non-participatory narration in verbal voiceover

In all the extracts, the narration is largely carried by a narrator, who addresses readers directly but does not dietetically exist in the story. In the verbal texts, the consistent voiceover monologues contribute to creating a layer of narration that separates what the recitant narrates to the readers and what happens in the plots. Panel 3, Form 4.1.1-5 refers to Batman and Robin as ‘the dynamic duo’, directing readers’ attention and marking them as the central objects of the panel. Moreover, this nickname of this superhero partnership addresses their public identities as superheroes rather than the more humane, approachable aspects of the characters, emphasising their ‘super’ and outstanding characteristics that distinguish them from ordinary people, which is also illustrated in Case 3.2.2. More importantly, the voiceover texts tend to overlap or expand the images, telling readers not only where to look, but also what happens before, during or after. For example, the texts in yellow boxes can elongate the time duration of a motion in the visuals. In Panel 1, Form 4.1.1-4, the verb ‘watch’ specifies the motion of faceless images in the background as an act lasting longer than the fixed moment in the visual, which is of the same usage as ‘sprawls helplessly’ in Panel 3 Form 4.1.1-5 and ‘water rises ominously’ in Panel 1 Form 4.1.1-10. Apart from stretching the duration of a static image of a certain movement, the recitant’s monologue can also fill the narrative gaps between panels in a consecutive event. For

example, in Panel 3, Form 4.1.1-11, the recitation of ‘the layer of ice thickens rapidly above them’ explains the cause of the already thickened ice at the middle of the visual, which means the textual narration’s chronological sequence comes before the image rather than expanding its movement.

Moreover, overly detailed dialogues also contribute to separating readers from the narrative, in which the characters address each other but, in fact, the intended receiver is the readers. For example, in Form 4.1.1-11, the dialogue in Panels 2 and 6 about the features of ice formation is presented in a question-and-answer format. This suggests that the characters are already aware of the information or are capable of inferring it from their situation. The conversation, therefore, functions less as a genuine character exchange and more as a narrative device to convey the same information to the readers. Compared to the readers’ high relevance in the verbal text, both the images of Panels 2 and 6 are simply records of characters’ movement with less engaging flat shots, which do not contain visual reference for the mechanism Batman or Robin describes, such as ‘water expands as it freezes’. The information revealed in the dialogues is shared knowledge of the characters in the story arc, but it can hardly be interpreted from the images by readers. Thus, such elaborations, although unnecessary for the characters themselves, provide readers with a balanced understanding of what each character knows and how that knowledge shapes the narrative structure.

In terms of image-text collaboration, the informative texts show an interesting discrepancy between their high engagement with the readers and the low-key presence of the focal point in the relevant images. When the verbal texts contextualise the images, they usually directly address the readers as the receiving end of the narrator’s messages. Panel 1, Form 4.1.1-5 follows the group combat scene between the protagonists and the mobsters on the previous page and singles out one antagonist to explain how Batman and Robin were temporarily defeated. As shown in Form 4.1.1-4, the antagonist turns his back to the focal point while facing the protagonists, and in the next panel in Form 4.1.1-5, he turns to face the readers and explains what his pose, throwing round items, means. The change of the relative position of the focal point puts readers in front of the protagonists, turning them into the immediate receiver of the antagonist’s dialogue. The function of this character’s line about ‘marbles’ and ‘smooth floor’ is primarily informative because it provides additional specification to the visual representations and prepares for the Peak where Batman and Robin slipped, while the antagonist character himself is not further centred in later narratives. By moving the readers outside a direct engagement with the visual text, the images reinforce the alienating

effect of the voiceover and the explanatory dialogues, creating a consistent narrator who ‘tells’ the story to the readers rather than immersing them in it.

#### *4.1.1.3 Visual alienation for violent scenes*

Admittedly, voice-over monologues and informative dialogues are frequently found in the Golden and Silver Age comics in general, possibly to compensate for the technical restrictions in visualising detailed shading and colour variations. For example, in Form 4.1.1-10, the visual of ‘the door’ in Robin’s inner monologue is not easily identifiable as its ink lines blend with the curves that represent water, while the colouring of water is plain blue and white without using variations to specify the door. In this case, using a speech bubble with curvy outlines highlights the key information in the visual with repetition. However, such alienating narratives are particularly prominent in the depiction of violence, especially when the protagonists are temporarily overpowered by the antagonists and experience immediate discomfort and frustration.

In general, the visual texts discourage readers from engaging with violent scenes, applying multiple visual devices to keep the readers’ focal point of gaze at a distance both graphically and narratively. In the short story arc of the marble attack on p. 5, Panels 1-3 in Form 4.1.1-5 depict the Peak of Batman and Robin’s failure to capture the mobsters. While, as previously discussed, what the antagonist in Panel 1 says in the speech bubble functions more for readers’ convenience than for a natural monologue; in the visual texts, this character presentation is not fully devoted to appealing to readers’ participation. In this panel, the character indeed turns his face to the readers; however, the direction of his body and the motion line of throwing marbles gesture him away from the focal point. By pointing to the bottom-left corner of the panel, the character’s posture builds a cause-and-effect logical connection between the Establisher in panel 1 and the Release in Panel 3. Moving readers from the spot that directly interacts with the character, the image avoids evoking a potentially uncomfortable feeling of being attacked (even if marbles are commonly not considered a threatening weapon in reality). Then, in Panels 2-3, as the Peak and Release in this arc that directly depict the attack on the protagonists, the viewing perspective is detached from both the attackers and the attacked characters. In Panel 2, the flat long shot has little effect in heightening the dramatic tension of Batman and Robin tripping, as the focal point is too distant to engage readers in the perilous situation. It also lacks the theatrical depth or visual distortion that might otherwise amplify the sense of urgency.

The sense of disengagement continues in Panel 3, which is also drawn with a flat long shot. In Panel 3, the focal point is partially obscured by the wall on the right and remains distant from both the endangered protagonists and the fleeing villains. This occurs despite the fact that both groups are meant to be active participants in a pivotal moment that sets up the next sub-arc. Admittedly, the image in Panel 3 is slightly tilted to convey urgency and highlight the critical nature of the moment, which is a technique also used in three other panels on the same page. However, this shaking effect is achieved merely through a slight rotation of the image and does not influence the choice of viewing perspective. The perspective itself remains static, without tilting or distorting to emphasise a specific character or movement, which limits its impact on reader engagement. Similarly, in the next extract showing Batman and Robin escaping a deadly trap in a freezing warehouse, Panels 1–4 in Form 4.1.1-11 depict the characters' strong discomfort in the cold water. Although, in this conflicting arc, the threat is apparently more serious and realistically lethal than marbles, the level of identification remains to be reduced by far shots, a flat shooting angle, and a round panel border that evokes distanced observation through a telescope. Through these visual devices, the violence enacted on the protagonists' bodies is visible but not effective. In other words, the potential for an empathetic experience of pain and defeat is suppressed by more neutral, detached imagery.

The antagonists also tend to be presented as unidentifiable figures when the comic intends to stylise the violent scene and reduce the risk of sadistic pleasure in viewing. In Panel 2, Form 4.1.1-5, the antagonist group faces directly at the focal point when they 'get out of here', and the opposite position of readers and characters implies that the readers are not aligned with the antagonists. This cautiousness in the visualisation of violence even extends to the protagonists in Panel 1, Form 4.1.1-4. Despite the spectacle of idealised body shapes and dynamic movement, the fighting scene is depicted from a distance and gives little focus to Batman or Robin's first-person experience. Instead, facilitated by an over-shoulder shot, the more recognisable character is an antagonist who remains unaffected by the conflict. In comparison, in Panel 3, Form 4.1.1-10, the readers' viewpoint aligns with Batman's, placing them directly under the protagonist's gunpoint. This close perspective immerses readers in immediate danger, and yet the image itself does not include physical conflicts that could potentially cause empathetic pain or discomfort, suggesting that violence itself is not necessarily the key element to avoid; rather, controlling readers' identification gaze is more essential to mitigate the severity of violent scenes.

In addition to the in-panel presentation, the arrangement of panels further separates readers from participatory gazing. In the first extract, Panels 1-2 in Form 4.1.1-5 break up the continuity of the solid time-special representation in the panels by changing the level of abstraction in the comic language. In the panels before and after these two panels, namely Panel 1 in Form 4.1.1-4 and Panel 3 in Form 4.1.1-5, both the characters and the environment appear relatively figurative — that is, they are more recognisable as representations of real-life objects, despite the use of a typical comic art style. In comparison, the backgrounds of adjacent Panels 1-2 are plain colours without dimensional perspectives or figurative details. The differences in comparative realism between these two types of panels are illustrated by their rendering of perspective depth. To create an illusion of a three-dimensional scene in two-dimensional comics, the technique of drawing perspective depth is based on a theoretical point called the ‘vanishing point’, which represents, in reality, the furthest point a person can see. The size and shape of an object in an image are compressed and distorted towards the vanishing points when it moves away from the focal point, and vice versa. The indoor environment before and after Panels 1-2, Form 4.1.1-5, is drawn with a consistency in vanishing points to create visual depth, which means every object and figure follows the same pattern or distortion. In contrast, in Panel 2, the distances between the focal point and the two sets of characters are visualised by depicting the protagonists as smaller and partially hidden by the antagonist group in the front.<sup>345</sup> However, the plain-coloured background does not have any details to inform readers of the existence of the vanishing point and thus lacks a sense of space and distance. The change in backgrounds suggests a shift between a more realistic observing experience and a more abstract presentation with fewer environmental disruptions, suspending the sense of immediate time flow developed by the consecutive movements of repetitive characters.

In comparison, both the Establishment and Release of the plot about physical discomfort engage readers’ identification. When the threats to the protagonists are not immediate or physically violent, identification devices are applied for dramatic tension in critical narrative stages. In Form 4.1.1-10, Panels 2-3 present the Prolongation of how the antagonist threatened Batman and Robin and the Peak of his threat. The verbal texts also show signs of

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<sup>345</sup> If considered purely from a technical point of view, even the perspective depth of the figures in Panel 2 does not exactly match the height of the focal point. Judging by the frame composition that links Panels 1 and 3’s items. This discrepancy is likely to be an artistic choice to hide the marbles and create a suspension about why Batman and Robin slipped in the Peak rather than intended surrealism or stylisation, so this drawing ‘glitch’ is not further analysed as a visual art presentation.

informative overelaboration, but the heavy reliance on textual texts does not necessarily mean rigidity in the choice of visual devices for higher reader engagement. Unlike the previously discussed examples where readers do not actively participate in the visuals, the images of Panels 2-3 strongly call for readers' identification with the protagonist through compositional devices and the change of perspectives. Taking on from Panel 1's flat medium shot that puts readers into the role of an observer, Panel 2 turns to an extreme close-up from slightly behind Batman's back to create an over-shoulder shot and thus a third-person monstrator, which aligns the character's viewing perspective with the readers. In the next panel, the focal point further merges with the protagonist as the lens pans in even closer to the face of the antagonist. The relative positions of the two characters in Panel 2 suggest that the full-front viewing perspective belongs to the threatened protagonist, so the disappearance of the visual representation of Batman should likely be read as an intensive self-projection with the protagonist. Although the abstraction of the background in Panel 2, and the discrepancy between the time flow in the visual and the text still indicate the intervention of an independent narrator, the visual narration nonetheless switches from an outside observer to the first-person perspective. Thus, raising readers' identification with a participatory visual experience around violent scenes can maintain an engaging reading, while the alienating narrative in those scenes reduces the impact of empathetic discomfort.

#### *4.1.1.4 Toning down pain and adding comic relief*

In addition to the heavy presence of the narrator and the strategic guide of the alienating gaze, the depiction of violence can also be moderated by toning down the visualisation of suffering while empowering the protagonists. Firstly, the straightforward depiction of injured or suffering bodies is alleviated by the lack of striking facial expressions in response to the attacks. In Panels 2-3, Form 4.1.1-5, the protagonists' faces are drawn as either hidden (Batman in Panel 2 and Robin in Panel 3) or artistically processed with iconisation. In McCloud's categorisation of comic art styles, iconisation means to deduce the representative details in a realistic rendering of an item to make it an expressive and symbolic icon.<sup>346</sup> In other words, a visual is simplified to represent its full denotation and connotations, even though the specific imagery elements related to certain connotations might not be included in the graphics. In Panel 2, the discomfort reflected on Robin's face is simplified as short lines around a straight line representing the mouth, which can be observed to be consistent

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<sup>346</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 53.

in the next panel on Batman's face (in a printing size, their mouths even look more like comical pouting). In *Making Comics*, McCloud identifies five basic 'masks', or facial expressions of primary emotions, and combining them can create various complex emotions in comic visualisation.<sup>347</sup> As all the expression masks McCloud proposes require changes in facial features to express emotions, even for relatively abstract drawing styles, the two faces in Form 4.1.1-5 show very few changes to the shape of the eyes and the mouths compared to a neutral face. Thus, the facial expression of surprise and pain is not explicitly reflected in the visuals, and the short lines representing a tightened chin are a stylised icon for an uncomfortable feeling rather than a figurative representation similar to a real facial expression of pain.

Also, the far shots that show the characters' full bodies limit the size of their faces and thus how many details of facial features can fit into a very small space, technically restraining the delivery of a painful feeling with facial expressions. Similarly, in Panels 1-2 in Form 4.1.1-11, the verbal words expressing discomfort, such as 'cold' and 'ice crushing against my chest', hardly match the plain facial expressions in Batman and Robin's visual representations. Specifically, these two panels only show the characters' heads above the water, lacking other physical features to attract readers' attention. Thus, the information of negative physical experience is conveyed mainly in the textual text rather than in the more vivid, straightforward verbal text. Without spectacularised pain in the protagonists' faces, their suffering is not delivered with to-be-looked-at-ness and is insufficient to evoke readers' appreciation or identification.

Secondly, the protagonists' suffering is also alleviated with comical bodily images, as the body language that reflects the misery of defeated antagonists is not extensively depicted. In the entire issue, most of the antagonists' weapon choices are whimsical and unrealistic, such as slippery marbles, ladders lit with fire, itchy powder, water hoses on ice and a warehouse-sized freezer, which sets a comical context for the story's position on violence. In Panel 3, Form 4.1.1-5, Batman's slipping is drawn as stiffly falling down with short curves suggesting a waddle motion and radiating lines underneath to visualise the impact. Batman's body under attack is posed with an exaggerated gesture, with his legs flying in the air and his back flattened on the floor. The larger-than-life result of stepping on marbles, along with the

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<sup>347</sup> McCloud, *Making Comics*, pp. 80-101.

whimsical nature of including marbles as a legitimate weapon in the comic storytelling, gives this scene a sense of humour while avoiding a material threat to the protagonist's safety. Without visual indicators for pain and hurtfulness, such as blood or physical distortions, Batman's body language can hardly reveal his discomfort from being attacked, but only delivers the message that the antagonists successfully overpowered the protagonists. The exaggerated aspect in the bodily image adds a comical effect to the negative plot development instead of endowing the protagonists' misfortune with spectacular pleasure. Similarly, in Panel 2, the symmetrical poses of Batman and Robin also give this scene a sense of rigidity and dramatic pretentiousness that alleviates the realism in the narrative. Thus, although the passivity of falling is reflected in the motion lines, both the pose and facial expression are more iconicised rather than expressively responsive. The lack of relatable visuals for discomfort and stress further exaggerates the already comical core of the marble attack while keeping readers away from potentially negative associations with Batman and Robin's physicality in adversary narrative arcs.

The second extract exemplifies a more realistic threat to the protagonists. In Panel 2, Form 4.1.1-10, the antagonist explained his attempt to freeze Batman and Robin in a step-in cold storage building to make them into one ice-cube trophy. Regardless of this comic book motive, in common sense, deadly coldness is more relevant to reality than the marbles. In the development of this story arc, on the one hand, the superheroes' bodies are depicted with figurative representations to build tension between an upcoming critical threat and the hyper-capable male bodies. In Panel 1, Form 4.1.1-10, Batman and Robin's body builds are significantly squarer and more muscular in contrast to the slim antagonist. Such bodies with an implication of physical strength also form a contradiction to how they are tied up in a confined gesture, adding to the dramatic suspense about their escape. On the other hand, male bodies in suffering are constantly blocked from the readers' view. Specifically, Panel 3, Form 4.1.1-11 uses full black shadows on Robin when he commented on their drowning, avoiding explicit depiction of a reality-related near-death moment. In this context, the violent element — the lethal threat of freezing — is used as a narrative device that intrigues the story and challenges the protagonists' higher power position as superheroes, but violence itself is less important in contributing to the physical spectacle of the protagonists.

When the protagonists overcome the challenge and thus demonstrate their superior powers, the depiction of their bodies re-emerges as a sign of empowerment. In Panel 4, Form 4.1.1-11, although Robin's verbal thoughts continue to suggest desperation, the visual depicts

Batman and Robin swimming toward the storage house door, which is visually emphasised as the point of their eventual escape. In the next panel, Batman's physical strength is symbolised through the image of his fists breaking through ice, and the fragmentation of the body serves to iconise the fists as concentrated emblems of resistance and power. Moreover, the motion trajectories of the ice and the broken door, especially their shadowing lines, are in the same direction as the fists, creating a unified dynamic that reinforces the power of the protagonists. Finally, in Panel 6, the return to full-body depiction underscores the protagonists' physical resilience, highlighting their ability to recover despite having been overpowered by brute force. Compared to the previous example that ends with Batman and Robin's minor failure, this example connects empowerment with the inability to be hurt. As the final jeopardy, among all the setbacks and plot twists the protagonists underwent through in the overall story arc, the narrative of this example features a strong relief in which Batman and Robin successfully overcame the challenge and moved on to the final victory.

#### *4.1.1.5 Evaluation*

In the depictions of stylised violence, the narrative devices are more complicated than the seemingly rigid visual presentation and lengthy verbal texts. The textual texts tend to be detailed and descriptive, and the visual texts frequently apply stylisation and abstraction to interrupt the readers' sense of real-time presence. The presence of the focal point is not only limited, but also lacks real-time responses, and the time discrepancies in the verbal and visual texts, along with the informative texts, subtly point at the readers rather than the characters. It is suggested that, overall, the narrations in texts and images are carried out by an independent recitant and a disengaged monstrator who are detached from the storyline. The two sets of modalities combined create a narrator who does not exist in the fiction but instead is directly answerable to the readers' expectations for the story and who controls the pace of how the story progresses and how much the readers should see and know. In the panels that do not specifically present the unpleasant bodily experience in challenges, readers are encouraged to engage with the narrative by identifying with the protagonists or spectacularising the images. In the plots about hurting the protagonists directly, the depictions that can potentially induce sympathetic feelings are filtered by the narrator instead of encouraging readers to interact with the story, whether as intrusive observers or as identifying projectors.

This division of identification and alienation is paired with the protagonists' bodily presentations. When the threat of violence is not immediate, it is more likely that readers

project identifying gazes on the protagonists, and muscular male bodies are more frequently centralised as a visual spectacle. When physical threats are directly enacted on the protagonists, readers are encouraged to distance themselves from the narrative, and the threatened bodies are either concealed, removed from the centre of visual focus, or depicted in a way that downplays the severity of the violence. This strategy stylises violence through a comprehensive approach; It not only makes the visual representations less graphic, but also prevents readers from experiencing empathetic discomfort in response to the violent content. Thus, the purpose of stylised violence is not to induce gaze on the violence itself but to create a chance for the protagonists to demonstrate their physical strength and capability, which reinforces the narrative about superhero masculinity, bodily capability and power.

#### 4.1.2 Graphic Violence in ‘The Broken Bat’

Compared to stylised violence, this section discusses the impact of graphic violence as a key source of viewing pleasure on the interpretation of masculinity when a superhero is the victim rather than the enforcer. The case-studies are selected from *Batman Vol 1 # 497* titled ‘The Broken Bat’ (1993).<sup>348</sup> As a major title issue approved by CCA, ‘The Broken Bat’ is not exempt from certain stylisation techniques, such as its cautious avoidance of blood and gore despite the severity of injuries, which complies with the restriction in the Comic Code (1989) that violence is acceptable within comic contexts ‘when dramatically appropriate’.<sup>349</sup> However, its overall heavy focus on sadistic abuse and iconised comic language exaggerates the spectacle of violence and makes relevant scenes a representative of graphic violence in a classic comic art style. In terms of its theme, ‘The Broken Bat’ is the first issue of the *Knightfall* arc, and as the title already implies, *Knightfall* marks the first time this seemingly invincible superhero sustained irreversible, long-term physical trauma in his entire vigilante career. As the main story is as straightforward as Bane invading the Batcave and attacking Batman, the narrative structure of #497 is simplistic and streamlined, directing more attention to violent scenes and making the assaults on the protagonist a more centralised source of visual pleasure. This heavy fixation on Batman’s injured body challenges superheroes’ hyper-resilience and the convention of stylised comical violence without consequence, which arguably makes the *Knightfall* arc one of the most important milestones in the history of Batman. Among *Knightfall*’s approximately two-year span in 1993-94, and

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<sup>348</sup> Doug Moench and others, ‘The Broken Bat’, DC Comics, *Batman*, 1.497 (1993).

<sup>349</sup> *Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America* (1989), in Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, p. 329.

coverage of more than 70 individual issues, ‘The Broken Bat’ is the very key issue that initiated the arc by fully dedicating itself to the details of how the antagonist Bane savaged and disabled Batman. With elaborated depictions of violence and physicality, this publication is closely relevant to the gaze on how injury and pain infiltrate the integrity of a male protagonist’s identity.

#### 4.1.2.1 Form analysis

In #497, Bane’s overwhelming attack on Batman consists of more than ten small arcs of assaults. Among all the fights, the extracts are selected from a Peak when Bane throws Batman into the memorial cabinet of Jason Todd, who is Batman’s once deceased adopted son, on p. 15, and the Peak of Bane’s final conquering of Batman on pp. 19-21. Form 4.1.2-15 selects two close-ups in Panels 2-3 on p. 15, which depict Batman’s misery and helplessness under Bane’s brutality.

Source: panels 2-3, p. 15, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #497 (1993)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	<i>...BUT IT WAS <b>BANE’S BLOODY HAND BEHIND THEM, BEHIND IT ALL.</b></i>	N	I	N
	Multi	CHOOOF	Y	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<b>BANE FROM THE BEGINNING -- AND BANE NOW, AT THE END.</b>	N	I	N
	Multi	<b>KESSH</b>	Y	N	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	S
Panel 3	Verbal	NO... <b>CAN'T</b> GIVE IN, NOT <b>NOW</b> , NO MATTER <b>HOW HURT</b> ... <b>CAN'T</b> LET HIM <b>WIN</b> ...	N	I	N
		CAN'T SURRENDER TO THE BLESSED RELIEF... OF <b>ENDING IT ALL</b> .	N	I	N
		JASON...ROBIN...	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	S
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Large panels divided by borders but no gutter between panels 1 and 2; objects in Panel 1 extending to Panel 2.				
Narrative functions	Peak-Release (Arc: Bane threw Batman into a cabinet.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation		
	Y	A	N		

21\_Form 4.1.2-15 Batman collapses into a cabinet, p. 15. Batman Vol 1 #497.

Forms 4.1.2-19, 4.1.2-20 and 4.1.2-21 cover all the panels on pp. 19-21, giving a detailed record of Bane snapping Batman’s back and claiming victory over him.

Source: panels 1-3, p. 19, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #497 (1993)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	...AND NOW...FEEL SO BAD...I WANT TO <b>DIE</b> ...	N	I	N
		<b>BEG FOR MERCY!</b>	N	N	N
	Multi	<b>SCREAM MY NAME!</b>	N	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	G·GO...BACK TO...	N	N	N
		...HELL.	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	
Panel 3	Verbal	AND I'M <b>DONE</b> .	N	I	N
	Multi	SWOK	Y	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Overlaying panels with clear-bordered divisions; gradual growth in panel sizes, unbalanced panel directions.				
Narrative functions	Prolongation (Arc: Bane broke Batman's back.) Initial-Peak (Sub-arc: Bane slapped Batman's face.)				
	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation

Gaze relevance	Y	A	S
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22\_Form 4.1.2-19 Bane slaps Batman in the face, p. 19. Batman Vol 1 #497.

Source: panels 1-2, p. 20, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #497 (1993)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	I AM <b>BANE</b> -- AND I COULD <b>KILL YOU...</b>	N	N	N
		... BUT DEATH WOULD ONLY <b>END YOUR AGONY</b> -- AND <b>SILENCE YOUR SHAME.</b>	Y	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<b>INSTEAD</b> , I WILL SIMPLY...	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Clear panel division with borders; large panel 2.				

Narrative functions	Prolongation (Arc: Bane broke Batman's back.)		
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
	Y	A	S

23\_Form 4.1.2-20 Bane picks up Batman, p. 20. Batman Vol 1 #497.

Source: panel 1, p. 21, <i>Batman</i> Vol 1 #497 (1993)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Multi	... <b>BREAK YOU!</b>	Y	N	N
		KRAKT	Y	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Single-panel illustration; panel borders in an explosive shape.				
Narrative functions	Peak (Arc: Bane broke Batman's back.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation		
	Y	A	S		

24\_Form 4.1.2-21 Bane breaks Batman's back, p. 21. Batman Vol 1 #497.

#### 4.1.2.2 *Circulation of power in sadistic and masochistic gazes*

Comparing #497's striking visuals and the stylised violence in the last case-study, it is easy to observe that 'The Broken Bat' has a different approach to presenting violent elements in comics: dynamic, vivid, and explosive. In this visual spectacle, both the protagonist and the antagonist receive the readers' gaze and play different roles in accomplishing viewing pleasure. As pp. 19-21 progress to the final Peak of the story, where Bane overpowers Batman with physical force, the visuals reflect an even distribution of gaze on both Batman and Bane. In Form 4.1.2-19, Panels 1 and 2 alternate between positioning Bane or Batman as the primary focal point. Panel 3 centres both figures within the composition, employing a flat shot and subtly exaggerating Bane's height to maintain their simultaneous visibility and avoid visual overlap. In Forms 4.1.2-20 and 4.1.2-21, the visuals in all panels are full-body shots that allow readers to fully observe the two characters' consecutive movements. To compensate for the distance between readers and the characters in comparatively faraway scenes, the background of these three pages is abstracted into extremely saturated colouring of yellow and orange to amplify the intensity and urgency in this conflict. The lack of references for the surrounding items (except for the red rocks in Panel 2, Form 4.1.2-20, which are mostly covered by Panel 1) also minimises the potential distractions of environmental information and prioritises the details on the bodily presentations. Moreover, on p. 21, the Peak takes the form of a full-page illustration, deliberately slowing the narrative pace. This expanded visual space foregrounds the spectacularised rendering of both the attacker's and the victim's physicality, heightening the scene's impact and inviting sustained viewer attention.

In this shared attention to both Batman and Bane, visual perspectives and other devices amplify the power distance between the two characters, reinforcing Bane's consistently higher power position over Batman in the story arc. Form 4.1.2-19 has two panels with close-ups of Batman's suffering face and one graphic depiction of him being hit in the face, while Bane's revealing shoulder and chest are placed either as the larger subject (Panel 1) or at the compositional centre (Panel 3). The pace of panel sizes, comic explosive effects and strong motion lines draws readers' attention to the presentation of violence in the largest panel (Panel 3), creating a contrast between the placidity of the protagonist and the activeness of the antagonist. In Panel 1, Form 4.1.2-20, the visual's flat shot not only allows evenly shared depictions to the physics of Bane and Batman, but also straightforwardly illustrates the contrast between their status without a perspective depth to mask their size differences: Bane being big, healthy, hairy and hyper masculine, while Batman being small, beaten up and

exposed through his torn uniform. The next panel switches to a bird's-eye view shooting from Batman's lifted body, exaggerating the height between him and the ground. As this panel is juxtaposed next to the full-frame illustration of Batman's fall, such a dramatic perspective can create a spectacular effect to strengthen how heavy Bane's drop was. All these panels use visual strategies that heighten the contrast between the active and passive roles, foregrounding the attacker's control and the victim's suffering as the direct cause and result of violence. This sustained emphasis on violence operates as a visual metaphor for the struggle for power.

Then, the breaking-back scene on p. 21 applies all the aforementioned devices to make Bane's final invasion of Batman's autonomy a shocking view: including a single-panel frame, graphic texts, motion lines, and explosive panel borders. Bane's verbal line 'break you' is not circled in a speech bubble but floats at the top of the frame as a graphic text, making it also appear to be a unanimous comment to repeat the visual's information as an emphasis. The visual itself is also in a full-body shot from a flat perspective, but the second-person pronoun engages readers with a sensational exclamation as it breaks the pattern of visualising speeches and creates a false sense of being referred to until readers make a correlation between the visual representation of Batman and the pronoun. The lingering attention, accompanied by the vivid depiction of men's bodies, makes this page the very highlight of aesthetic violence.

In this viewing experience, readers' stance tends to align with the antagonist verbally and the protagonist visually, before the identification gaze is gradually replaced by alienation in the Peak. In visual texts, the readers' viewing experience tends to merge with the antagonist as the dominant perpetrator to enforce pain onto the protagonist. In Panel 1, Form 4.1.2-15, the low viewing perspective and far shot suggest that the focal point is positioned behind, and off the central line of, both characters, so the relative positions from left to right should be Bane, Batman and spectators. As the motion lines can create time duration in a static panel, the trajectory of Batman's movement makes him expected to move towards the focal point and closer to the readers. In the next panel, however, the result of such movement in the Peak of this sub arc is depicted from the front instead of Batman's back, which implies that the viewing perspective does not follow the expectation of movement but rather has circled to the opposite direction. From Panels 1 to 2, the height of the lens is also elevated from slightly above the ground to an eye-level height for a flat view. Considering the relative

positions, in Panel 2, the readers' viewing perspective is merged with that of the antagonist, creating a temporal identification gaze with Bane.

On the other hand, in the verbal text, the frequent inner monologues elaborate on Batman's feelings and reflections, which expand the visuals by either adding information that is not reflected in the image or discussing issues independent from the characters' movements. For example, in Form 4.1.2-15, Batman's monologue in green square boxes comments on the destined entanglement between Bane and himself, which does not overlap with the visual. The shape of the dialogue boxes and the italic font of the monologues, being visually different from the round speech bubbles such as those in Panel 3, Form 4.1.2-15, suggest a train of thought parallel to the narratives embodied in the visuals. Batman's reflections only share a loose cooperation with the intensive conflicts in the visual text, implying his dissociation from the torturous surroundings. These verbal texts, despite not being spontaneously responsive to the actions in visuals, reflect the protagonist's reaction that cannot be understood by himself but can be observed by the readers. By prioritising the readers' role as an outside observer, the verbal texts reinforce the alienation in the visual texts. At the same time, the monologues also encourage readers to feel engaged with the submissive character when spectating the violence enforced onto him, validating the antagonist's higher power position from both sides of the conflict.

Form 4.1.2-19, as the last frame before the Peak, witnesses the end of visual identification with the villain. Panel 1 uses an over-shoulder shot from Bane's back to present Bane as a third-person monstrator, and the last visual device for encouraging readers' identification with Bane appears in Panel 2, where the close-up of Batman's face repeats the visual representation with a first-person perspective. Although Panel 3 is not a typical over-shoulder shot, it switches the lens from a higher position facing the protagonist to a lower position under the antagonist's punch and the protagonist's back. The change of distance and direction exaggerates the strength within the antagonist's attack, siding the readers with the beaten protagonist and distancing them from the perpetrator. Additionally, Batman's monologue disappears after his thought, '*and I'm done...*', in Panel 3, claiming the fade of his consciousness and foreshadowing the end of a subject with which readers can sympathise. The following two pages after Panel 3 are all depicted with little engagement from the readers, as the viewing point circles around the characters without changing the perspective of the focal points to fit either of the characters. Thus, readers' viewing experiences stop merging with any of the characters and they tend to act as stand-alone observers.

Drawing on the characters' differing power positions and their visual emphasis, the identification devices produce circulation of power in the audience's gazes: alignment with Bane for the sadistic pleasure of power fantasy, and with Batman for the masochistic pleasure that acknowledges and responds to Bane's dominance. As the narrative advances to the decisive attack, an alienating gaze, which has been discussed in stylised comic-book violence, prevents empathetic discomfort while reinforcing the underlying message that to hurt is to conquer, and thus to wield power.

#### 4.1.2.3 Spectacularised victimhood

Bodies, as the vehicle of violence and the objects of readers' gaze, are depicted in exaggerated stylisation in the extracts. In Section 3.2.1, the comical idealisation in Batman's physique has been illustrated and analysed, and Bane's body in #497 is also visibly distorted and dressed in a fantastical, comic book style manner. First appearing in *Batman: Vengeance of Bane* (referred to as *Vengeance*) in 1993, Bane is designed as a Caribbean-referenced supervillain physically enhanced by a fictional muscle enhancer called Venom.<sup>350</sup> His visual representations among different versions and media are usually a masculine giant dressed in exposing, wrestler-style masks and uniforms. Described by Justin F. Martin and Marco Favaro, Bane is 'a combination of cultural legacies from reclusion narratives, city mysteries, pan-Hispanic stereotypes, and pulp-fiction superhumanity myths to result in yet another Doppelgänger version of Batman'.<sup>351</sup> As one of Batman's recurring key enemies, Bane extends the cruelty and physical prowess in Batman's character design with a villainous twist.

Although both the bodies of Batman and Bane bear strong to-be-looked-at-ness as counterpart characters, Bane's physique is arguably more grotesquely muscular, and his costumes are more revealing. The extract of pp. 19-21 repeatedly emphasises the size difference between the hero and the villain with perspective depth (Panel 1, Forms 4.1.2-19) and contrasts (Panel 1, Forms 4.1.2-20 and Forms 4.1.2-21), depicting Bane as a significantly larger man in a dominant position. Compared to Batman's cover-all tight suit, Bane's costume has more skin exposure and deviates more from practical uniforms or daily wear. Like the KGBeast uniform discussed in Section 3.1.2, which also exposes the villain's upper

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<sup>350</sup> Chuck Dixon and others, 'Vengeance of Bane', *DC Comics*, *Batman: Vengeance of Bane*, 1.1 (1993).

<sup>351</sup> Jesús Jiménez-Varea, 'Bane: The Man Who "Doppelgängered" the Bat', in *Batman's Villains and Villainesses: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Arkham's Souls*, ed. by Justin F. Martin and Marco Favaro (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023).

body, Bane's costume lacks a clearly documented origin or explanation. As such, it remains uncertain whether its design was intentionally driven by aesthetic or sexual considerations. However, considering Bane's Caribbean cultural background, it could be possible that the match of the mask and the wrestling singlet is a reference to *lucha libre*, a form of professional wrestling originating in Mexico, characterised by colourful masks, dramatic costumes, and exaggerated physical performances that blend sport with theatrical spectacle. Bane's larger-than-life physique and the dramatic, eye-catching qualities of his real-life inspiration and visual design position him as potentially a primary source of visual spectacle in his confrontation with Batman, so much so that he risks overshadowing the hero.

Almost in a contradictory manner, in the visual and visual-verbal narrative, Batman's body as the victim of violence is more centred and displayed in objectifying gazes. In Form 4.1.2-15, the three panels present a moment when Bane throws Batman into the exhibit cabinet of the second Robin's outfit. Unevenly divided in the frame, the panel sizes grow to be bigger with the chronological progression. This panel arrangement imposes a slower pace and greater narrative weight, which contrasts with the intense, rapid action implied by the motion lines and explosive stars in Panels 1–2. The dissonance between the visual pacing and the depicted movement directs readers' attention toward observing the attack as a spectacle rather than experiencing its immediacy. Among these panels, Panel 1, the least focused one, is an extreme far shot that depicts the two characters' motion and the environment, setting up environmental information such as the characters' stances to contextualise the close-up in the next panel. Both characters' representations appear in this frame, and Bane is mostly covered behind Batman's back and cape, showing one muscular arm with motion lines to indicate the action of him hitting the protagonist. Apart from this small visual representation of Bane's arm, neither of the characters has an emphasised bodily display because the colouring and shading are evenly distributed and saturated, and the body structures are roughly concluded and not as emphasised as in Panels 2-3. The characters' visual representations are more informative than dramatic, which, as the only image of Bane in this frame, limits the antagonist's presentation of his body.

The following Panels 2-3 drastically pull the lens towards Batman and cut Bane outside the limitation of panel boxes, completely removing his visual representation from the visuals. Instead, Batman becomes the only gravity of viewing with a detailed display of his injured body, and multiple visual devices are applied to visualise the threats to the protagonist's masculinity. In terms of the composition and perspective, both panels place Batman's body

at the ½ compositional line in a full-body close-up shot that allows detailed depictions of his facial expression and wounds. In Panel 2, the prolonged Peak captures the moment when Batman hits the cabinet with a dynamic posture that opens his defence and creates a sense of temporality, which is enhanced by the explosive effect and the bold graphic texts in an intensive combination of red and yellow. In the following Panel 3, the dramatic tension of this movement is released with Batman falling apart with a defeated body language. The close cooperation between the relief of physical tension and the narrative release centralises physicality, especially the violated body, as the key element of this arc. Manifesting this focus on male bodies, the focal points are consistently positioned between the protagonist's thighs. The scopophilic arrangement of the lens adds further emphasis on the invasiveness of spectating Batman's submissive gesture, amplifying the victimhood of the protagonist in the viewing pleasure.

#### *4.1.2.4 Homoeroticism and the threatened masculinity*

The connection between physical harm and dominance gains further significance for the performance and contestation of masculinity when placed in a homoerotic context. The comic's verbal and visual texts combined establish the metaphor of invasion and control, reinforcing the sadistic pleasure in the alienating gaze on the victim. In Panel 1, Form 4.1.2-19, Bane's verbal orders for Batman's submission explicitly underscore the exclusivity and almost intimate nature of their rivalry. During his torture of Batman, Bane paused to command 'beg for mercy' and 'scream my name!', with the latter particularly emphasised by red graphic characters to show a progressive intensity. In the following panels, Bane continues to verbally affirm his dominance regardless of Batman's curse and eventually breaks him physically. As Coogan observes, a supervillain's soliloquy or monologue implies a set of contradictions in their power dynamic with the superhero: on the one hand, their lengthy performative explanations diegetically stem from their faith in owning superiority over any opposing forces.<sup>352</sup> On the other hand, reaching out to a listener/listeners reflects a psychological need for seeking confirmation on their validity and legitimacy, wanting 'the approval of the hero, who is by definition superior and not afflicted with the inferiority complex of the villain'.<sup>353</sup> By disregarding the failure of accruing Batman's confirmation,

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<sup>352</sup> Coogan, 'The Supervillain', pp 51-52.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 51-52.

Bane overpowers the supposed superiority of the hero and unifies his pleasure in physically and psychologically conquering his opponent.

Bane's wording may not deviate greatly from typical villainous threats. However, the accompanying imagery, which suggests physical confinement and penetration, frames his demands of Batman, particularly his insistence on using Batman's name, as a claim of exclusive possession. In the same context, Bane's hit on Batman is marked by the breaking points on his uniform instead of more realistic blood and wounds, symbolising the penetration of the representation of Batman's superhero identity. In Form 4.1.2-21, the graphic text of onomatopoeia and the explosive star placed where Bane kned Batman visualise the extreme impact of this hit, suggesting the force of Bane's attack trespasses into the depth of his body. His demand for name-calling implies that Batman must not only submit, but submit specifically to Bane, the figure who controls, penetrates, and ultimately breaks him, concluding the struggle of dominance with a perspective of physical engagement and control.

Admittedly, individual elements in this scene, such as body exposure, power struggles, or even the metaphor of penetration, do not necessarily lead to homoeroticism. However, the intertextuality of Bane's obsession with dominating Batman unifies these elements and reframes the exposed flesh, the spectacularised violence, and the exaggerated masculine bodies in their fighting scene into homoerotic fetishisation. The continuity of Bane's character image among DC Comics' publications has a strong relevance to homoeroticism and hypermasculinity. Apart from the previously discussed visual design that features high skin exposure, Bane's origin story also shows a theme of same-sex desire and an obsession with Batman as his counter-image. Bane's debut in *Vengeance* is portrayed as a victimised inmate in a men's prison; a setting implicitly coded with stigmatised homosexuality and male intimacy. His backstory includes being threatened by attempted rape during adolescence and the development of a close, affectionate bond with his future criminal partner, Bird, setting his early experiences within an environment where violence, vulnerability, and intimacy between men are deeply intertwined.<sup>354</sup> *Vengeance's* story arc is concluded with Bane finding his purpose in living, which is to destroy Batman to demonstrate his superiority. In 'Sorting Out Villainy: A Typology of Villains and Their Effects on Superheroes', Rosenberg identifies a type of villainous character as 'sadistic'

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<sup>354</sup> Dixon and others, 'Vengeance of Bane', pp. 8-9 +24.

because the pleasure of destruction serves as their primary drive — 'who wreaks havoc simply because he or she can and who enjoys it'.<sup>355</sup> Bane's urge for destruction makes sadistic a fitting description of his presence in Batman's rogue gallery. Within the homosocial background of Bane's character image, his exclusive fixation on Batman and his excitement when enforcing violence is endowed with homoerotic significance, threatening the heteronormativity in Batman's masculine identity.

#### 4.1.2.5 Evaluation

In 'The Broken Bat's exaggerated presentation of graphic violence, the correlation between physical harm and the loss of power makes injuries to the protagonist's body a material representation of threatened masculinity. Male bodies become not only a spectacle, but also a materialised battlefield of power struggles. Since such a physical existence is either invaded (Batman) or unnaturally boosted (Bane) to overpower one another, the promise of a superhero being a model representation of men is broken with the unresolved damage in the conclusion of the *Knightfall* arc. The interplay of violating dominance and violated victimhood resulted in differences in the types of gazing: the identifying gaze on the antagonist's static display of body, and the alienating gaze on the protagonist's dynamic performance as the victim. The threat to the hero's masculine identity is therefore not confined to physical harm, nor is it solely the result of the antagonist's aggression. In this narrative, violence functions as a metaphor for fracturing the integrity of subjectivity. The excessive yet alienating emphasis on the victim's suffering places the protagonist under the power structure of both the antagonist and the readers' homoerotic gaze, objectifying him as a spectacle for desire and stripping him of his dominant agency. In 'The Broken Bat', masculinity is presented not as an inherent quality naturally embedded in a muscular body, but as a performed attribute that can be taken from a man once he is defeated.

## 4.2 Peeking Under the Batsuit: Nudity

As the previous introduction on self-censoring codes and Dauw's observation in *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits* exemplify, female nudity is more frequently specified as prohibited, while

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<sup>355</sup> Robin S. Rosenberg, 'Sorting Out Villainy: A Typology of Villains and Their Effects on Superheroes', in *The Supervillain Reader*, ed. by Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), pp. 73–77, pp. 76–77.

nakedness in male bodily images tends to be less visible and targeted.<sup>356</sup> Furthering Chapter Three's discussion on idealised physicality, the nakedness of male superheroes, which is less culturally visible and controversial, subtly presents the ideal of bodily perfection. In *Super Bodies*, Brown forwards an interesting argument that the almost unrealistic enhancement of the aesthetic value in superheroes' bodies, which is often gendered with hyper-masculine/feminine signifiers, differentiates their nakedness from mere pictures and records of undressed bodies. As Brown comments, '[t]he essentially nude superhero body at the center of Idealism adheres to classical dictates of nude art as an improvement on real bodies [...] they are "reformed" as nude, clothed in bodily perfection — "balanced, prosperous, and confident."'”<sup>357</sup> In other words, exposed bodies of the superheroes are thus not simply a status in contrast to their uniformed status but rather costumed in an image of bodily perfection, reinforcing the genre's preoccupation with unattainable, idealised norms of masculinity.

In contrast, depictions of naked, or partially naked, male bodies that are not meant to evoke empowering idealisation are relatively rare, yet they often attract disproportionate attention or even backlash. For example, in *World's Finest Comics* Vol 1 #59 (1952), an individual panel (Graph 4.2), depicting half-naked Batman and Robin using tanning beds, is often singled out and highlighted as evidence of homosexual implication,<sup>358</sup> regardless of its non-sexual context and, to be frank, moderate visualisation. A more famous example is the nude of Bruce Wayne in *Batman: Damned* #1 (2018),<sup>359</sup> which will be examined in a later section. In this issue, one page showing Batman undressing himself and walking fully naked in the Batcave ignited such intensive reactions and controversies among both the publisher and readers that the attention to superhero nudity with revealed genitalia overshadowed the actual content of the issue, regardless of the visual artist's clearly stated intention for 'high art'. In a 2023 interview, Lee Bermejo responded to the incident with 'I honestly thought we had come so far in comics that we could treat something like Batman in the same way we look at Greek or Roman statues... in other words, as art. Plus, I didn't do it in an exploitative

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<sup>356</sup> De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits*, pp. 6, 77.

<sup>357</sup> Brown, *Super Bodies*, p. 68.

<sup>358</sup> David Vern Reed and others, 'Batman: "The Joker's Aces!"', *DC Comics*, *World's Finest Comics* 1.59 (1952), p.4; Richardson, *Batman and the Joker*, p.5.

<sup>359</sup> Brian Azzarello, Lee Bermejo, and Jared K. Fletcher, 'Book One', *DC Black Label*, *Batman: Damned*, no. 1 (2018).

way.’<sup>360</sup> Several scholarly works also comment on the severity of public distress at the surprisingly matter-of-fact illustration. For instance, Richardson comments in *Batman and the Joker* that ‘[i]n an age of online pornography, celebrity scandal, and hypersexual advertising, Wayne’s exposed body seems rather chaste [...] But the demand for this issue — and, really, this image — would never have surfaced without the illicit sight of Batman’s sex organ’, which is similarly observed in Anna Peppard’s *Supersex*.<sup>361</sup> If looking at the genre’s treatment of the phallus in general, the anxiety over actual depictions of male genitals in *Batman: Damned* is widely evident in how the bodily images persistently avoid, moderate or censor the shape of genitalia, producing what *Superbodies* identifies as a ‘genre-specific treatment of crotches’ designed to deflect potential gazes at relevant areas.<sup>362</sup> As *Supersex* suggests, this proliferation of symbols and evasions signals a deep cultural insecurity about masculinity, where the phallus is everywhere implied but nowhere permitted to appear.<sup>363</sup> The paradoxical universality and invisibility of male nudity, especially those challenging taboos about visualised genitals, suggest that naked bodies in superhero comics are both central and impossible, making them an omnipresent absence that sustains the genre’s uneasy negotiation between power, propriety and the legitimacy of masculine presentation.

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<sup>360</sup> Tiffany Babb and Sam Stone, ‘Lee Bermejo Revisits Batman: Damned Controversy Four Years Later’, *Popverse*, 12 January 2023.

<sup>361</sup> Richardson, *Batman and the Joker*, pp. 2-3; Peppard, *Supersex*, pp. 9-11.

<sup>362</sup> Brown, *Super Bodies*, p. 84; Brown, *Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>363</sup> Peppard, *Supersex*, p. 250.

Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions

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4\_Graph 4.2 Batman and Robin in tanning beds, *World's Finest Comics*  
Vol 1 #59, p. 4.

#### 4.2.1 Strength and Identity Metaphors in ‘The Dead Yet Live’

As discussed in Section 3.2.1, the visual appreciation of male bodies is a common signifier of power and masculinity in superhero narratives. This section extends that analysis by examining how nakedness is used to celebrate idealised male physiques, internalising visual dominance as an inherent trait of the male body. The case-study, drawn from *Detective Comics* Vol. 1 #471 (1977), focuses on the prominent depiction of Batman’s muscular, half-naked body in adversary situations. In #471, titled ‘The Dead Yet Live’, Batman was convinced to receive care from a third-party medical institute, only to find that the hospital was run by the supervillain Scarecrow. This issue presents a nuanced approach to the themes of the body and power. On the one hand, the story begins with Batman admitting his need for physical care, disrupting the illusion of an indestructible superhero. It also incorporates elements traditionally associated with vulnerability or weakness — such as fear, hospitalisation, and nudity. On the other hand, it deliberately avoids framing these elements through a lens of weakness and instead uses them to reinforce Batman’s dominance. This layered treatment makes ‘The Dead Yet Live’ a compelling case for examining how nudity under the gaze can express subjectivity and reinforce masculine identity within a context of disempowerment.

### 4.2.1.1 Form analysis

Form 4.2.1-9 records the full story arc of Batman waking up in a locked ward, arguing with a hospital staff member and realising his trapped situation, which covers all eight panels on p. 9.

Source: panels 1-8, p. 9, <i>Detective Comics</i> Vol 1 #471 (1977)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	WHAT A <i>NIGHTMARE...!</i>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<i>WAIT A MINUTE! I NEVER HAVE NIGHTMARES! I GIVE NIGHTMARES!</i>	N	N	N
		AND THE WAY I <i>COLLAPSED--!</i> I <i>REMEMBER</i> NOW!	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Panel 3	Verbal	IT MUST HAVE BEEN <i>MAGDA'S PERFUME-- DRUGGED</i> ME! SHE PROBABLY WORE <i>NOSE-FILTERS!</i>	N	N	N
		BUT <i>WHY--?</i>	N	N	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Panel 4	Verbal	<i>WHA--?</i>	N	N	N
		<i>LOCKED!</i>	N		N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y		N
Panel 5	Verbal	<i>SUDDENLY--</i>	N	N	N
		OKAY, BUDDY--WHAT'S THE <i>BEEF?</i>	Y	N	S
		I'M <i>BRUCE WAYNE</i> , A <i>PATIENT</i> IN THIS CLINIC! THERE'S BEEN SOME <i>MISTAKE--</i>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	I	N
Panel 6	Verbal	IF THERE'S BEEN A <i>MISTAKE</i> , IT'S <i>YOURS</i> , BUDDY! YOU AIN'T ANY MORE <i>BRUCE</i> <i>WAYNE</i> THAN <i>I</i> AM!	N	N	S
		AND <i>THIS</i> AIN'T NO CLINIC! IT'S AN <i>ASYLUM</i> — <i>NUTHOUSE</i> , TO YOU —	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 7	Verbal	-- <i>SO SHUT YOUR YAP</i> OR I'LL HAVETA <i>STRAP YA DOWN!</i>	N	N	N

	Multi	<b>SLAM</b>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	I	N
Panel 8	Verbal	OHH... <i>REALLY--?</i>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Vertical and horizontal rectangular panels divided with borders and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Initial-Release (Arc: Batman wakes to find himself imprisoned in an asylum.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		I		N

25\_Form 4.2.1-9 Batman finds himself wrongly held in an asylum, p. 9. Detective Comics Vol 1 #471.

#### 4.2.1.2 Progressive alienation and the deprivation of power

In this extract, Panels 1-4 and 5-7 contain a transition between identifying and alienating gazes, building up narrative tension that initially puts the protagonist in a low-power position. In the first group of Panels 1-4, the focal point moves away from the protagonist to gradually alienate the readers. Taking up the visuality of nightmares on p. 8, Panel 1 sets the beginning of this frame with a close-up depiction of Batman's face, which suggests a change between Batman as a first-person and a third-person monstrator; in other words, changing from seeing what the protagonist sees to viewing him as an independent observer. In the following three panels, the lens is implied to step further from the character as the composition changes from a medium shot (Panel 2) to a far shot (Panel 4), switching the scene from a subjective dreaming experience to an eerie real situation and distancing readers from identifying with the protagonist. By presenting Batman in a low-power position with an extreme close-up,

Panel 1 emphasises his discomfort as he wakes up from a nightmare, encouraging an invasive gaze at Batman's loss of control. The radiating action lines in the background and the exclamation with bold words in the verbal text also suggest being caught off guard. In this composition and the text-image device, presenting Batman's face covered with his hand, which is a natural body language of rejection and self-protection, implies vulnerability and weakness.

Then, Panels 5-7 illustrate an exchange of gaze, in which readers' identification shifts from the protagonist to the antagonist. In Panel 5, the close-up of Batman's back head in the right corner suggests that the readers' line of gaze is projected in the same direction as the protagonist. This visual guidance makes his figurative representation function as a surrogate projector of the readers' gaze and thus a first-person monstrator, creating an immersive visual experience calling for readers' identification. The eyes of the antagonists are centred by both the composition and the doorframe that blocks the Batman-reader unity from probing the entirety of him. This composition puts the protagonist and the readers siding with him under the viewing of the antagonist while rejecting the gaze they initiated, implying a threat in the protagonist's lower power position. Panel 7 is also drawn from the perspective of a first-person monstrator. The close-up depiction of the arm and the direction of the speech bubble suggest that the verbal text and the visual reference to the action's initiator are connected outside the panel as the same person. This time, the readers' gaze is merged with the antagonist instead, and the graphic text 'SLAM' with an explosive motion line in the antagonist's movement when he closes the viewing hole to Batman's cell suggests a strong rejection of the protagonist.

#### *4.2.1.3 Bodily images as empowerment*

Beneath the apparent disempowerment suggested by the alienating gaze, the male body in the final panel of this short story arc reasserts the protagonist's power. In the entire extract, Panels 4 and 8 both contain a clear depiction of Batman's half-naked body. The implications of his power position are different in the two panels, which are linked by the equal position of gazing and returning gazing in Panel 6. In Panel 4, Batman realises the danger of the situation when, wearing only underwear, he fails to open the ward's door. His body is shown from the thighs upward, muscles tense, and posture strained in a gesture of struggle. The character's body language and the curvy lines around his wrist suggest that he is incapable of resolving the current predicament, repeating the information in the verbal text as '*locked!*' and implying that the current predicament is beyond the control of his physical power. The

monotone use of blue on both the environment and Batman's body suggests a lack of indoor lighting filtered with artistic stylisation, creating an ambience of negativity and repression with cold colours. This is reinforced by Panel 6, where the yellow hue of Batman's skin presents a more natural rendering of skin tone, contrasting with the purple-to-blue palette of Panels 1–4. However, compared to Panel 1, the verbal texts in Panel 4 and adjacent panels are endowed with more positivity and activeness. In Panel 2, Batman denied the fragility of being scared by nightmares, claiming 'I *never* have nightmares! I *give* nightmares!'. Batman's physics, viewed in a flat, non-invasive lens, is drawn with a strong light-shadow division that emphasises the bulky muscle structures, which provides a contradictory implication of strength and prowess, loading the nudity with a duality of passiveness and activeness.

In Panel 6, the implication of Batman reversing the power dynamics paves the way for Panel 8's confident presentation of the protagonist's body. In this panel, both lines of verbal text are the antagonist's challenge to Batman's identity as Bruce Wayne, emphasised with frequently bold italic words as a visual reference for an intense tone. Such an aggressive attitude is in line with the antagonist's unfriendly facial expression as he looked at Batman, which takes up most of the panel in a close-up shot. The invasiveness in his gaze and the judgmental comments suggest that, in this section, the antagonist temporarily holds a higher power position than the protagonist. In contrast, the protagonist does not argue against this denial. The visual only shows his eyes with a neutral expression, returning the antagonist's gaze. To the readers, this image equally presents the two characters' exchange of gaze with a flat, distanced view, subtly implying that, although overall Batman is passive and overpowered by the villain, he also has the potential to reject this structure and regain his power.

Finally, in Panel 8, nudity is reinterpreted as a representation of empowerment, which is especially reinforced by the symbolic shadow of the Batsuit. Moving from the hallway scene to the ward's interior, the hue of the overall colour palette returns to the artistically stylised blue, which maintains the dramatic tension and implication of threat with the unease associated with cold tones. Against such a background, Batman is posed in a confident position facing the focal point directly. The face of the character is covered in shadow with only two eyes being lit up, and the muscular body is almost fully lit by soft ambient light from the front, indicating a contradiction in lighting directions: top lighting for the facial shadow, front lighting for the body, and almost unnaturally centred reflective light for the

eyes. The ambiguity in sources of lighting and the unnatural shape of the shadows suggest that they should be read as an intentional visual device, which, compared to the more natural rendering of eyes in Panel 6, literally highlights the protagonist's returning gaze at the focal point.

More importantly, the Batsuit shadow confirms that the protagonist's body contains more relevance than mere flesh and blood. Judging by its shape, the shadow is not a faithful reflection of the protagonist's naked body but a symbolic suggestion of his innate strength and the core of his self-perception, as superhero costumes are commonly read as a reflection of their identity and one of the key elements distinguishing a superhero.<sup>364</sup> The surreal contrast between the exposed body and the armour-like shadow reflects how Batman appears to be vulnerable as a mortal man, but in fact has an inseparable and mystified power sourced from his superhero identity. This contradiction of mortality and transcendental otherness makes this Batman story arc a typical hero narrative, as his existence, 'in a very real sense being part of the world and caught up in the human condition, is at the same time understood as standing outside of the world we know.'<sup>365</sup> In this sense, the naked body itself becomes more closely relevant to a higher power position and has less association with weakness than the nudity in previous panels, which is confirmed by the alienating gaze from readers as an objective, non-diegetic affirmation. By building a connection between the male body and power, Batman's lean muscles, well-proportioned body shape, aggressive body language and all other masculine physical features are now seen as an inseparable vessel of his superhero identity. In this essentialist narrative, the significance of a male body is not only a physical existence, but also an embodiment of his transcendence, reinforcing the legitimacy of dominant masculinity.

#### 4.2.1.4 Evaluation

In this section, the portrayal of male bodies is characterised by nudity and detailed depictions of musculature, yet remains devoid of sexualised implications. Instead, this small arc about Batman in danger begins with bodily presentations that link exposure with vulnerability and progresses to reverse the negative association with nakedness by connecting Batman's superhero transcendence with his bodily image in an essentialist manner. In this process, the

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<sup>364</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, pp. 32-39.

<sup>365</sup> Alsford, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 23.

readers' gaze tends to be alienated to provide a sense of objectiveness when it confirms the protagonist's power position, except for in a few panels where an identifying gaze is used to dramatise the threat Batman faces. Returning to such distancing gazes, the protagonist's visual representations feature firm reverse gazes that are directly projected towards the focal point and the antagonist, implying a power dynamic that breaks the established connection of skin exposure under gazes and a low-power position. In the final panel, by relating the protagonist's physical prowess in a muscular figure with his ultra-human identity, the male nudity is characterised with confidence in the character's dominant power position.

#### 4.2.2 Vulnerability and Voyeurism in *Batman: Damned*

Naked bodies can be a demonstration via visibility but can also be a window exposing vulnerability, and superheroes — conventionally male characters in dominance — are interestingly no exception to such scopophilia gaze. In Batman's publication history, one of the most famous yet controversial issues about nudity is *Batman: Damned* #1 (2018), a mini-series of graphic novels published in DC's Black Label franchise.<sup>366</sup> It sparked heated public debate upon the release due to a subtle depiction of Batman's full-frontal nudity, marking the first time such imagery appeared in official DC Comics' canon. The issue was quickly edited in subsequent printing, and DC Comics made a good, if not their best, effort to withdraw from the market all hard and digital copies of the original version. In the revised release, DC Comics censored the nudity page with black shading to cover the genital areas. The controversies and the subsequent recall in turn elevated the original version's status as a sought-after collector's item with a rough price of \$30-40 for an ungraded single issue and \$100 for a graded collection in recent years.<sup>367</sup> The collecting price is not as staggering as the signed copies' surprising listing price of \$1,749.99, which was recorded by Anna Peppard in her scholarly overview of this publication incident; nonetheless, almost ten times higher than average newly released issues after seven years of the first publication,<sup>368</sup> illustrating the wide social impact of *Batman: Damned*.

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<sup>366</sup> Brian Azzarello, Lee Bermejo, and Jared K. Fletcher, 'Book One', *DC Black Label*, *Batman: Damned*, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>367</sup> 'Batman: Damned #1 (2018) Prices | Batman: Damned Series', PriceCharting, n.d.; 'Batman: Damned #1 Group of 2 (DC, 2018) Condition: Average NM-.... | Lot #13905', Heritage Auctions, 2025.

<sup>368</sup> Peppard, *Supersex*, p. 11.

As Peppard's brief yet detailed discussion points out, the controversies over *Batman: Damned* are characterised by a contradiction of the strong responses from the readers and publishers alike and the mild nature of the page, as illustrated by the original page in Graph 4.2.2.<sup>369</sup> Both the nudity scene itself and the entire issue are not loaded with sexual implications, nor does the image specifically highlight the genital area. The relevant story arc is set in a medical context, where Batman sought physical examinations from the artificial intelligence in the Batcave after a near-death experience, and thus the naked body is contextualised and depicted as neither sexual nor erotic. Moreover, as a Black-label series, *Batman: Damned* stands alone outside the main comic universe and is targeted at more mature audiences, which means, to some extent, this series is expected to be more graphic and explicit than main universe titles. The disparity between the simplicity of a nude image and the intense public reaction it provoked makes this issue a compelling case for examining the voyeuristic dynamics of male nudity and its perceived threat to dominant constructs of masculinity.

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<sup>369</sup> Peppard, *Supersex*, pp. 9-11.

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Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions

*5\_ Graph 4.2.2 Preview version that includes Batman's nudes, Batman: Damned, quoted from Supersex: Sexuality, Fantasy and the Superhero, p.10.*

#### **4.2.2.1 Form analysis**

The selected examples are from pp. 29-32, which depict Batman's hallucination of being attacked by a hollow Batsuit. For the convenience of discussion, the fantasised villain in the shape of Batman's suit is referred to as 'the Phantom Batsuit'. Form 4.2.2-29 analyses all the panels of p. 29, which elaborates on Batman taking physical examinations. This is the page in question that contains nudity and is also the censored version of Graph 4.2.2.

Source: panels 1-7, p. 29, <i>Batman: Damned #1</i> (2018)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	COMPUTER--	N	A	N
		<i>STANDING BY</i>	N	N	N
		RUN BODY SCAN.	Y	A	N
		<i>SCANNING</i>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<i>COMPLETE</i>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 3	Verbal	<i>HEART RATE ONE TWENTY OVER EIGHT-SIX</i>	Y	N	N
		<i>WEIGHT TWO HUNDRED SEVENTY POINT THREE</i>	Y	N	N
		NO NEW CONTUSIONS OR--	Y	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	S

Panel 4	Verbal	RESCAN FOR RECENT WOUNDS OR SCAR TISSUE.	Y	N	N
		<i>SCANNING</i>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	S
Panel 5	Verbal	<i>EXPECTED BLOOD VESSEL TRAUMA AT JOINTS</i>	Y	N	N
		<i>BRUISING ON BACK AND RIGHT THIGH</i>	Y	N	N
		<i>SWELLING IN RIGHT LABRUM POINT ZERO TWO PERCENT GREATER THAN</i>	Y	N	
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	S
Panel 6	Verbal	ANY EVIDENCE OF MULTIPLE FATAL STAB WOUNDS?!	Y	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	S
Panel 7	Verbal	<i>NEGATIVE</i>	N	N	N
		NEGATIVE?	N	N	N

		<i>AFFIRMATIVE</i>	N	N	N
		BULLSHIT.	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	S
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Six evenly divided panels in boxes and one large panel without any borderline.				
Narrative functions	Orienter (Arc: Batman was attacked by the Phantom Batsuit.) Orienter-Release (Sub-arc: Batman underwent medical examinations in disbelief of the results.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation		
	Y	A	N		

26\_Form 4.2.2-29 Batman takes physical checks, p. 29. Batman: Damned #1.

Form 4.2.2-31 and 4.2.2-32 contain the last panels of p. 31 and the single-illustration page of p. 32, showing the Peak of Batman's hallucination with graphic horror.

Source: panels 4-5, p. 31, <i>Batman: Damned #1</i> (2018)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	?	N	N	N
	Visual <sup>370</sup>	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Panel 2	Verbal	NO...	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	S
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Small rectangular panels with thick white boxes overlaid on a large illustration as the background.				
Narrative functions	Prolongation (Arc: Batman was attacked by the Phantom Batsuit.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		A		N

<sup>370</sup> The blanks are previous panels that are not discussed in the following analysis, not dialogue boxes. For the full comic page, see Appendix 2.

27\_Form 4.2.2-31 Batman under the threat of the Phantom Batsuit, p. 31. Batman: Damned #1.

Source: panels 1, p. 32, <i>Batman: Damned #1</i> (2018)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	NO...	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions		A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Single-page illustration.				
Narrative functions	Release (Arc: Batman was attacked by the Phantom Batsuit.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		A		N

28\_Form 4.2.2-32 Batman fails to resist the Phantom Batsuit's threat, p. 32. Batman: Damned #1.

#### 4.2.2.2 Alienation, objectification and the spectacle of suffering

Overall, within single panels, both the verbal text and images in this extract place readers as disengaged observers of the protagonist's suffering. At the Initial of the hallucinated attack, a group of panels depicts the environment without presenting the character. Panels 1-3 and 5 in Form 4.2.2-29 give extensive details of Batman's medical check, such as stalactites in the Batcave (Panel 2) or undressed clothes (Panel 3), which prolong the duration of the checking process with environmental information that does not necessarily push forward the story's development. While the slowed narrative pace encourages readers to observe the moment, visually the lack of a focused central object, such as a person or item that contributes to the narrative arc, avoids invoking their gaze, especially on the protagonist and

thus a sense of engagement. Also, in these four panels, the viewing perspective does not belong to the protagonist or a specific representation of the viewers. For example, Panel 1's visual is an abstract representation of darkness, and in the following panels, the focal point moves around the Batcave from a flat shot of the ceiling to a bird-eye view of the entrance and then jumps to a close-up of the protagonist's torso. The sequence of the lens movement is not sequential and thus does not fit the chronological development in the verbal texts and the overall panel connections, presenting the visuals in an alienated, stand-alone perspective that does not exist in the fiction. Thus, the readers do not participate in the storytelling with a surrogate projection of themselves but as a detached lens invading the fictional sphere.

Under this consistent alienating gaze, the visual texts feature a heavy focus on the protagonist and present him only as a displayed object. In Panels 4, 6 and 7, Form 4.2.2-29, Batman's face is cut out from panel boxes in the extreme close-up shots, and the figurative representation of his body does not express information beyond the visible movements, nor does it address the presence of a receiver of body language. By avoiding depicting the character with interpretable facial expressions or body language, the visual stops readers from understanding the character and thus blocks their identification, which creates tension in a similar manner as the fragmented body in Section 3.1.1: the synecdoche causes a discrepancy in what is intuitively completed ('a person with subjectivity') and what is reasoned ('a body chunk without subjectivity'). Both the scene and the character's behaviour suggest that these demonstrations of the bodily image happen in the character's private moment and are not intended to be observed or actively displayed. However, the reader's gaze is forced onto the bodies that take up most of the panels' space and are situated at the compositional centres closer to the focal point (for example, the relative distance between the Batmobile and Batman in Panel 7). On the side of the gazed object, the character does not acknowledge the presence of the spectators; nor does it return the gaze with the depiction of his face, so the readers can hardly understand the character in a sympathetic manner and identify with him, making the experience of looking at Batman's body a completely detached experience. Moreover, considering the elusiveness and invasiveness of the focal point, the visual devices in these panels typically direct the gaze in an objectifying and scopophilic manner. Similarly, panels in Form 4.2.2-31 and Form 4.2.2-32 are also drawn with an invasive lens, aiming at probing how Batman exposed himself to a non-existing gazer. In Form 4.2.2-31, the relevant positions of Batman and the Batsuit being face-to-face in Panel 1 suggest that the focal point on the protagonist's side in Panel 2 is an independent viewing point and, in Panel 2, an extreme close-up is applied to the character

posed in a hiding posture, creating a gaze at his suffering regardless his avoidance and inability of returning it. Following this page, Form 4.2.2-32 keeps the character hiding his face in rejection of his surroundings, while his entire body is lit with a blue-toned highlight against the red background and exposed to the readers' gaze.

#### 4.2.2.3 *The boundary between 'me' and 'him'*

What complicates the viewing experience is that before the Release of the hallucination arc on p. 32, there is no clear division between what actually happens and what happens in Batman's imagination. The repetitive inquiries for medical checks in Form 4.2.2-29's verbal texts develop an implication of the conflict between reality and hallucination, which subtly links to the Peak of the Phantom attack on p. 31. More specifically, the contradiction between Batman's belief and his actual physical condition suggests that his perception of reality could be impaired. These Prolongations set up the suspense with conflicting information, but the reason for such a conflict between the protagonist's belief and objective evaluation remains to be unquestioned — Batman straightforwardly rejected the results as 'bullshit' without second-guessing the cause — until the phantom Batsuit reveals himself on p. 31. Since Batman's dialogue with the computer is the only type of verbal text in this arc, readers' doubts about this unusual phenomenon are likely to be suppressed by the protagonist's natural acceptance of the contradictions, blurring the difference between reality and hallucination. Furthermore, the visual follows the character's subjective perceptions in a third-person viewing perspective across panels, creating tension between the alienated viewing experience and the visual representation exclusive to the character's first-person perspective. In Panel 1, Form 4.2.2-31, the solid rendering of the Phantom Batsuit suggests that what happens in the protagonist's mind is also as vividly visible as reality. The ambiguity merges the visual boundary between first-person and third-person perspectives as, at the same time, the protagonist is also presented under the readers' gaze. Consisting of a large space in p. 31's frame and extending as the background of the entire page, Panel 1 attracts readers' attention with its centralised layout and extensively appeals to readers' sympathetic horror with a dramatic low-angle shot that puts the focal point even lower than the attacked protagonist. For the first time in this narrative arc, readers are positioned in the same direction as Batman, which puts them on the same side as the endangered protagonist to experience the invasive power of the imagined antagonist.

Thus, the threat that overpowers the protagonist is dualistic in nature: on the one hand, the readers play the role of an invisible third-party spectator invading the protagonist's private

sphere. On the other hand, readers' subtle identification with him successfully delivers how disturbingly threatening his hallucination is. Based on the power dynamics constructed in gazing, this extract's verbal and visual texts are both highly centred on physicality. Verbally, the textual texts in Form 4.2.2-29 report specific medical data describing Batman's body, and detailed information, such as specific weight and height, validates the image of a strong male figure with multiple injuries. Visually, in the panels that do not contain a figurative rendering of the protagonist, the implication of physical features is loaded in the environmental details. For example, Panels 3 and 5 specifically present the mess of the superhero suit Batman left on the floor. As the type of clothes becomes gradually more intimate as the narrative progresses, Batman's undressing scene is prolonged with an anticipation of viewing his exposed body and coded as a piping-tom moment because of the casualness and intimacy. By depicting the suits without including a subject owning them, these two panels also foreshadow the later conflict between being armoured with the superhero suit and the character himself.

#### 4.2.2.4 *More than a nude*

The visual attention on nudity, despite not being directly directed onto genitalia, is characterised by realistic art rendering that emphasises the sensual aspect of the bodily images. As discussed, in Form 4.2.2-29, Panels 4, 6 and 7 show fragmented body parts to invoke readers' close examination from a lens unknown to the protagonist. The three images are drawn with an interesting contradiction in the character's strength and vulnerability. Batman's body type is undoubtedly exaggeratedly muscular — even visibly bulkier compared to the Golden Age celebration of men's physical wonder, such as 'Crime through the Ages' in Section 3.2.2. The detailed depiction of scars on Batman's body reiterates the information in Panel 4's verbal text, '*wounds or scar tissue*', reinforcing its significance. It also hints at untold background stories, suggesting a history of endurance and resilience and intensifying the viewer's curiosity and sustaining a scopophilic interest.

Compared to more typically stylised comics, the rendering for the body includes a complicated set of techniques that gives extra details and textures in a life-like yet spectacle manner: the harsh, cold lighting rims the clear shapes of muscles and gives it a pale, smooth quality, while the thick, decorative black outlines that differentiate the character from other items. Moreover, even if the lighting is intense, the muscles are not depicted with a linear division between light and shadows (see the sharp shadows in the two cases of Section 3.1, for instance). The gradual transition in half-lit areas makes the image of Batman's body more

tender and vulnerable, and the relative saturation of blue and grey creates an illusion of warm-toned skin. ‘[T]his is a body that can be hurt, unlike the hypermasculine and seemingly impenetrable body that Batman is most often illustrated with. Furthermore, because Bermejo’s art humanises Batman, it also gives him a sense of fallibility.’<sup>371</sup> Similar attention-calling visual devices are also applied to the Phantom Batsuit, yet presenting it as an alternative body of the protagonist that symbolises strength rather than vulnerability. The visual representations of the suit in Forms 4.2.2-30 and 4.2.2-31 give elaborate details about its texture and volume, rendering it as a solid existence alongside the protagonist. Similar to the references of strength and prowess in superhero bodies, the suit’s visual representation is equally coded with physical power — muscle-like structures framed by supporting structures (Form 4.2.2-32) and resilience — thick protective gloves and armoury materials (Form 4.2.2-31). Both pages position the phantom at the compositional centre of the entire frame and as the largest subject compared to the protagonist’s figure, showing it as another target of the gaze parallel to the protagonist’s body.

Specifically, Panels 6-7 are the very panels that triggered the controversy over Batman’s nudity. In the first released version of Panel 7, a less pronounced but visible depiction of the protagonist’s genitalia appears at the bottom left corner, which is covered in the solid black shadow in the second released version and the digital version. As illustrated by the comparison between the two versions in Graph 4.2.2 and Form 4.2.2-29, the rendering of the specific body part is not highlighted as the visual centre nor exaggerated in the form or texture. Considering the invasiveness of gaze induced by the composition, such as in Panel 6, where the gravity of the composition is loaded on Batman’s crotch, this underrepresentation of sexual characteristics places readers in an unusual place for gazing: the context of Batman’s nudity is purely medical and irrelevant to sexuality, but the focus on physicality here is clearly visualised with gendered characteristics. Thus, the objectifying gaze, with which the readers overpower the character, also pulls the readers to such a close physiological range to the character that it breaks the pre-existing boundary between readership and the character’s sexuality. This unparalleled exposure to privacy alters the invasiveness of the gaze into a tool to perform power over the gazed object, satisfying the pleasure of scopophilia and giving the imagery of muscles and skin a direct reference to sensuality. The censored version toned down the relevance to gender by hiding the genital

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<sup>371</sup> Brown, *Super Bodies*, p. 135.

area, but since the majority of the visuals remain unedited, the spectating experience still does not lack reflection on masculinity.

The visual rendering of the phantom Batsuit and Batman's body shows a strong contrast to polarise the two entities and prioritise the power position of the suit. Taking Form 4.2.2-32 as an example, the textures, structures and colours of the two subjects are drastically different in a compensatory manner: the Batsuit is large, rigid, geometrical, complicatedly reinforced with layers of materials and toned with deep scarlet ambient lighting, while the human skin and muscles are drawn with organic flowy curves, completely uncovered in a passive gesture and lit with a compensate blue colour from behind. The character's highlighted body draws readers' attention to his exposed status, especially to how small and vulnerable compared to the hollowed suit. Reinforcing this protective gesture against the Batsuit's hallucinated attack, the character's verbal rejection, which is not responded to by both the unshaken image of the suit and the readers' gaze, further confirms his passivity in comparison to the symbol of his vigilante ego. On the opposite, being positioned at the compositional centre of the picture and taking the majority of the space, the suit's symmetrical posture directly faces the focal point, returning the readers' gaze with an active display of a strong bodily image (despite being no physical 'body' within). The emptiness at the receiving end of the gaze on the suit makes it a symbolic representation of an impervious male image, in other words, an incarnation of the superhero's manliness.

The objectifying gaze on the character's body, on the other hand, is material and aggressive to the protagonist's pessimistic exposure. The division between the body and the uniform, reflected in the narrative arc as a conflict between illusion and reality, identifies two united entities — suit-superhero and nakedness-man — that put the male body in a weaker position and break the connection between a male character and his hypermasculine alter ego. By intersecting the protagonist's transition between his superhero and mundane identities, the exposed body fundamentally shakes Batman's dominant position, as 'It is during transition [of identities] that the superhero is most vulnerable.'<sup>372</sup> Masculinity is no longer a feature naturally innate in a male superhero's existence, but rather, physical presentation as a mortal man becomes a counterpart to the dehumanised superhero identity as his armour, challenging the seemingly self-evident link of hypermasculinity and the superhero.

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<sup>372</sup> Brownie and Graydon, *The Superhero Costume*, pp. 79-80.

#### 4.2.2.5 Evaluation

The naked scene in *Batman: Damned* explores the division between Batman's hyper-masculine superhero identity and Bruce Wayne without such an identity, which is symbolically visualised as an evil phantom Batsuit and Bruce Wayne being completely naked. The former, being fully covered, uninterpretable and elusive to the gaze, overpowers the latter and casts fear on the readers when their identification with the protagonist is invoked, while the latter is also posed under the readers' invasive gaze as a passive object for observation. Unlike in Section 4.2.1, where the exaggerated muscles and other masculine bodily features are a representation of a superhero's ultrahuman prowess, in this case, the detailed depiction of flesh forms a contrast between the firmness of the suit and the softness of the man's skin, separating the superhero identity from the protagonist and rewriting it into a potential source of threat. Exposing a male body is thus correlated with vulnerability, to-be-looked-at-ness and deprivation from the source of masculinity, representing unsettled anxiety about passivity under the control of a more masculine alter ego. With the comparison between the body and the suit, what makes this display of a man's body a threat is that it disassociates a superhero's public identity as a male hero from his private identity as an ordinary man, questioning the association between the superhero and the embodiment of masculinity by rendering the male body passively vulnerable. In the *Encyclopaedia of Heroism studies*, the display of vulnerability as a heroic act is strictly defined by an active intention to choose the status of being exposed.<sup>373</sup> In *Batman: Damned*, however, Batman does not choose; rather, the gaze overrules his privacy and chooses for him, making his nudity less a classic ideal as Bermejo intended, but more of a disqualified hero — not the display of vulnerability, but the vulnerability displayed.

### 4.3 Concluding Remarks

The case-studies in this chapter explore how the Batman series uses different multimodal strategies to negotiate masculinity in controversial elements in superhero comics. Focusing on two representative themes, namely violence and nudity, the case-studies expose the

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<sup>373</sup> Anna Bruk, 'Vulnerability Display and Heroism', in *Encyclopedia of Heroism Studies*, ed. by George R. Goethals, James K. Beggan, and Scott T. Allison (Cham: Springer Nature, 2024), pp. 2198–205, p. 2199.

instability of dominant masculinity, which is significantly influenced by narrative framing and power relations.

The first two cases focus on the presentation of violence, discussing two extremes of how physical conflict is rendered in comics. Although not lacking in spectacularising, the stylised violence in ‘Enemy No. 1’ (1945) functions as a protective filter. By downplaying Batman’s suffering, the narrative prevents the reader from experiencing empathetic discomfort that might undermine the hero’s strength. Violence is present, but its consequences are deflected through abstraction and alienation, so that masculinity remains intact, linked to capability and resilience rather than to bodily weakness. In contrast, ‘The Broken Bat’ (1993) forces readers to confront the exaggerated brutality in graphic violence that disables Batman for the first time. The superhero body, normally untouchable, is stripped of invulnerability and becomes a source of sadistic viewing pleasure, which destabilises Batman’s masculinity by taking him out of his typical dominant power position. The two examples show two contrasting implications of violence: stylised violence resolves fragility, and graphic violence exposes vulnerability, leading to contrary impacts on the protagonist’s dominance and masculine identity.

In the second set of cases about male nudity, gazing on a superhero’s exposed skin also oscillates between empowerment and disempowerment. In ‘The Dead Yet Live’ (1977), nudity reinforces rather than fractures authority, as the gaze confirms physical superiority and internalises his superhero identity as an inseparable feature of his physical existence. By framing exposure through confidence, reverse gazes, and essentialised musculature, the narrative transforms nakedness into proof of masculinity. On the contrary, *Batman: Damned* (2018) reopens the tension between nudity and masculinity. Here, full-frontal nudity provokes controversy precisely because it separates the hyper-masculine superhero from the vulnerable human beneath the suit. The body, stripped of armour, becomes an object of invasive gazes and symbolic weakness. Unlike in ‘The Dead Yet Live’, nudity is not redeemed as power but presented as a threat, a reminder that the superhero’s masculine identity is performative, fragile and under the threat of being deprived.

Taken together, these examples underscore that Batman’s masculinity is not fixed but contextually determined by narrative framing and power relations. Violence and fear do not hold a single meaning; instead, they can either bolster masculine dominance or erode it, depending on whether the protagonist maintains control of his power position within the

story. In this way, controversial elements act as narrative pressure points that test the stability of superhero masculinity, exposing it as a precarious and performative construct that must be constantly secured, renegotiated, or reimagined in relation to shifting dynamics of power.

## Chapter 5 Destruction and Reformation: Reshaping Masculinities in Narratives

Comic writer Grant Morrison describes his vision of superheroism as ‘my feeling is that these heroes, like they always do, have risen in response to an emergency [...] and these superheroes offer images of a human future where we might actually survive and pull through.’<sup>374</sup> His point about superheroes’ transcendence in the face of emergencies reflects the transforming power of superhero narratives: a superhero not only defends, but also transcends. By proposing resolutions beyond the capability of the ordinaries — the expected normalcy, this radical nature in superhero comics represents the destructive potential that fits what Christopher Norris describes in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*: ‘a constant reminder of the etymological link between “crisis” and “criticism”’, which is also noted in Brooker’s research on Batman’s character development as ‘a close reading of a text, concept or theory, which seeks to unsettle its internal, structuring oppositions’.<sup>375</sup> These perspectives suggest that superhero narratives operate as both imaginative and critical spaces, where extraordinary characters not only resolve crises, but also expose and interrogate the underlying tensions and possibilities.

In Batman stories, this transforming potential has never left his long publication history. Not surprisingly, it is well-known that Batman’s mini-series, spin-offs and parallel-universe stories tend to be experimental, explorative and radical. As Henry Jenkins observes, ‘[t]here is much greater tolerance for works on the fringes of the continuity — such as an alternative ‘what if?’ or ‘elseworlds’ story, or works that are designated sites of auteurist

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<sup>374</sup> Grant Morrison, quoted from Greene and Roddy, *Grant Morrison and the Superhero Renaissance*, p. 92; I would like to point out, not without regret, that I could not include any of Morrison’s Batman stories in the case-studies due to the limitations of both the topic and volume of this thesis. Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging that Morrison has left a long-lasting, widely recognised mark in Batman’s legacy, such as the temporary assumed death of Batman in *Final Crisis* ((2008), which interestingly ties in with *Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader*, whose more literary, experimental writing and illustrations are discussed in Section 5.1.1) and the creation of Damien Wayne during his run of *Batman* (2006) in the ‘Batman and Son’ story arc. His works would be an unignorable core material for research on, for instance, superheroes and domestication, which unfortunately cannot be explored further in this chapter.

<sup>375</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), doi:[10.4324/9780203426760](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203426760), p. xii; Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. 182

experimentation'.<sup>376</sup> As the first character to headline under 'DC Black Label', the mature-readers' imprint DC Comics launched in 2018, *with Batman: Damned* #1 (2018), alternative Batman stories have been enriching the genre of superhero narratives with controversies and inspiration. This is repetitively illustrated by influential mini-series with high cultural relevance, such as *Gotham by Gaslight* (1989) — DC Comics' first elseworld story, *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) and gendered graphic violence, and probably the most prominent representation of modernism and postmodernism Batman in DKR (1986) and its sequel, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2001-2002).<sup>377</sup> Even more interestingly, in the main continuity, Batman also does not lack progressive and subversive elements. As one of the earliest examples of its kind, 'The Rainbow Batman', published as early as 1957 in *Detective Comics* #241, has been celebrated for its whimsical yet successful deconstruction of the preconstructed notion of Batman being dark and stealthy.<sup>378</sup> The subversive interpretation of colourful Batsuits coincides with the spirit of mockery and subversion in the camp culture and was later 're-discovered' and reframed as a radical *avant la lettre* icon after rainbows became a core symbol of the camp culture, and this issue itself is parodied by readers as shorthand for the campier, more fantastical side of the genre. In later development, major Batman stories rapidly responded to — sometimes also led — the shift in the superhero genre and evolved through different forms of superheroes, such as sci-fi in the Silver Age and dark in the Modern Age. More importantly, especially since the Modern Age, described as 'an age of disillusionment, an age of irony, an age of question marks',<sup>379</sup> this rapid development reflects the comic artists' challenges and resolutions of, not merely the character, but the genre and its implications of role models and ideals.

As the last chapter, Chapter Five organises its case-studies on the topic of deconstructive and reformative potentials, exploring how elements that are commonly deemed as

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<sup>376</sup> Henry Jenkins, 'Man without Fear: David Mack, Daredevil and "The Bounds of Difference" in Superhero Comics', in *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe*, ed. by Matt Yockey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), pp. 66–104, p. 67.

<sup>377</sup> Brian Augustyn and others, 'Gotham by Gaslight', *DC Comics*, no. 1 (1989); Alan Moore and others, 'Batman: The Killing Joke', *DC Comics*, no. 1 (1988); Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 1–4 (New York: DC Comics, 1986); Frank Miller, Lynn Varley, and Todd Klein, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, 1st ed. (New York: DC Comics, 2001-2002).

<sup>378</sup> Edmond Hamilton and others, 'The Rainbow Batman', *DC Comics*, *Detective Comics*, 1.241 (1957).

<sup>379</sup> Karin Kukkonen and Anja Müller-Wood, 'Whatever Happened to All the Heroes? British Perspectives on Superheroes', in *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives*, ed. by Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), pp. 153–63, p. 153.

unconventional, or at least not positive, in superhero narratives can encourage the revision and enrichment of normative masculinity. The case-studies select two types of radical themes in commercial superhero comics: natural physical degradation and queer coding. Compared to the visible taboos in Chapter Four, which have been historically criticised, regulated and censored, these direct challenges to superheroes' corporal masculinity and sexuality tend to be avoided by the genre in a nuanced, implicit and conventional manner. The first two examples discuss ageing and death, which tend to be avoided for economic benefit and for maintaining superheroes' transcendence. By directly facing these topics, the narratives in both case-studies move beyond challenging the essentialist masculinity that Batman stories typically present. More importantly, they hold more flexible stances on the legitimacy of idealising masculine performances and the necessity of masculine identities in superhero narratives. The next two cases discuss camp visuality and homosociality, arguing that Batman stories can potentially expand the norms of masculine performances. These elements, being subtly written yet frequently found in the entire comic history of Batman, reflect the duality of superheroes' impact: they are a synthesis of conservative gender agendas, but their 'super' nature also allows them to be a reformative cultural force that shapes the future perception of masculinity.

## 5.1 Truly Grim and Gritty: Ageing, Death, Rebirth

Batman seems to be there and will be there forever. In most DC Comics publications, especially in the main universe franchises, Bruce Wayne's Batman does not '...age at the same pace as other characters around him and hence does not reach the inevitability of retirement. As Taylor's comment, '[f]lipping through any superhero comic, one can find [...] bodies that do not age according to conventional standards of time.'<sup>380</sup> While Bruce Wayne continues to be Batman with little intention of moving into a new stage of life, except for the current Robin Damian Wayne, all the teenage Robins have graduated from their trainee/sidekick roles and assumed independent superhero identities.<sup>381</sup> Admittedly, Bruce

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<sup>380</sup> Taylor, 'He's Gotta Be Strong', p. 348.

<sup>381</sup> This generalisation has a slight exception that needs clarification: Tim Drake resumes his Robin identity in *Young Justice* Vol. 3 #18 (2020) and is expected to continue sharing the mantle alongside Damian Wayne, at least up to the completion of this thesis. As the main-universe Damian has been aged up rapidly from a child to a teenager roughly during 2022-2025, Tim's never-ending adolescence becomes more prominent as their age gap subtly shrinks, implying another interesting fracture about ageing in the comic continuity. In 'Robin,

Wayne has been subtly aged in more recent publications, especially when his dynamic with other protagonists requires him to be, for example, a father figure in *Batman and Robin* (2023-).<sup>382</sup> Even then, his performance in his vigilante career is not significantly impacted by the ageing, suggesting that oldness is used as a visual signifier of a shift in identity or social roles rather than a more fundamental threat to his physical being. Similarly, as Batman's first ward (or adopted son, depending on the timeline), Nightwing has grown into an adult, theoretically in his late 20s or early 30s, in *Nightwing* Vol 4 (2016-).<sup>383</sup> The disproportionate speed of ageing between Batman and his former Robin changes their character dynamics from parenthood into brotherhood, as Lauren R. O'Connor notices,<sup>384</sup> steering away readers' attention from the *de facto* old Batman and cloaking the visibility of seniority.

The death of Batman is yet another material threat to his superhero career and, to comic readers, a selling stunt that has almost been exhausted in the past seventy years. Every time comics venture into killing off Bruce Wayne, or pretend to do so — spoiler alert, this cliff hanger happens a lot, some early examples being, 'The Death-Cheaters of Gotham City!' in *Batman* #72 (1952), 'Going Sane' in *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight* #65 (1994), 'How to Murder the Earth' in *Final Crisis* #6 (2009) amongst many more — he rarely stays dead for long, meaning that 'Batman' becomes widely accepted as a shared title among several characters.<sup>385</sup> The most recent major attempt at writing off Batman happened in 2019, when

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Nightwing, Batman', Lauren R. O'Connor's sharp observation on Dick Grayson and the two younger Robins' dynamics points out a similar inconsistency. I would recommend this book chapter as an extended reading on the topic of ageing and adolescence in superhero comics, which I cannot fully explore here; Lauren R. O'Connor, *Robin and the Making of American Adolescence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021).

<sup>382</sup> Joshua Williamson, Simone Di Meo, and Phillip Kennedy Johnson, *Batman and Robin* (New York: DC Comics, 2023), iii.

<sup>383</sup> Tim Seeley and others, *Nightwing* (New York: DC Comics, 2016), iv.

<sup>384</sup> O'Connor, *Robin and the Making of American Adolescence*, p. 59.

<sup>385</sup> There are also, of course, exceptions. Apart from temporary retirement in the main universe twice, respectively after *Knightfall* (1993-94) and *Final Crisis* (2008), Bruce Wayne does have been diegetically replaced for good in multiple timelines, usually after his death rather than due to character ageing. For example, the alternative universe of the 'Future State' series partially takes on the *Fifth Generation Initiative*, with Timothy Fox taking on the Batman identity after Bruce Wayne's demise (*Future State: The Next Batman* (2021), *I Am Batman* (2021-23), and more). Other frequent Batman predecessors include Dick Grayson (*Kingdom Come* (1996), etc.), Tim Drake (*Teen Titans* Vol 3 17-19 (2004-05), etc.), Damian Wayne (*Batman* Vol 1 #666 (2007), *DCEased* (2019-21), *Trinity Special: World's Finest* (2024), etc.), Terrence McGinnis (*The New 52: Futures End* (2014-15)), and others. This admittedly long list of substitute Batmen from less influential universes illustrates Roberson's criticism that the alternative Batmen tend to be less famous or

DC Comics announced the *Fifth Generation Initiative* to replace the classic superhero figures with the uprising force of the next generation of heroes. Allegedly, the initiative planned to permanently pass on Bruce Wayne's Batman mantle to Timothy 'Jace' Fox, Lucius Fox's son, but the company eventually abandoned the initiative in 2020.<sup>386</sup> It seems that, despite the logical inevitability, realistic ageing and death are not a frequent theme in superhero stories.

In a journal article titled 'Why Doesn't Bruce Wayne Retire Already?!' — a fair question pointing directly at the elephant in Batman's nearly ninety-year-old room — Chris Roberson explains the endless postponement of Bruce Wayne's retirement as both the result of his commercial value in reality and the character's stubborn fixation on a vigilante career in the fictional world.<sup>387</sup> Indeed, compared to the fascination with depicting superheroes' bodies in their prime, ageing as a physical threat is a relatively niche topic in superhero narratives, which is commonly dealt with as either a sign of deprivation from the hero identity and masculinity or, in more inclusive discussions, a problem needing to be overcome. In narratives that reflect ageing in an essential, material manner, oldness is often relevant to a physical embodiment of one's legitimacy as a superhero. Julian Novitz notices that, in modern superhero comics, exemplified by DKR, *Watchman*, and *Kingdom Come*, ageing and physical deterioration are used 'as a means of exploring and contesting the status of the hero', which fits Taylor's observation on the distortion of physiques in *Kingdom Come*.<sup>388</sup> More humanely, in films *No Country for Old Men* and *Logan*, the challenges that aged heroes could encounter are negotiated to reassume the protagonists' agency, which, as Matek and Prtenjača argue, expands the landscape of masculinity in superhero narratives by giving visibility of illness, disability and seniority.<sup>389</sup> '[T]hey create space for the elderly and

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commercially successful than the original Bruce Wayne; J.M. DeMatteis and others, 'Going Sane, Part One: Into the Rushing River', *DC Comics*, Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight, 1.65 (1994); David Vern Reed, Jim Mooney, and Ira Schnapp, *The Death-Cheaters of Gotham City*, Batman, 1.72 (1952); J.G. Jones and others, 'How to Murder the Earth', *DC Comics*, Final Crisis, no. 6 (2009).

<sup>386</sup> Keegan Prosser, 'Jim Lee Says a "5G Reboot" of the DC Universe Is "Not Going to Happen"', *CBR*, 14 September 2020.

<sup>387</sup> Chris Roberson, 'Why Doesn't Bruce Wayne Retire Already?!', in *Batman Unauthorized: Vigilantes, Jokers, and Heroes in Gotham City*, ed. by Dennis O'Neil and Leah Wilson (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2008), pp. 99–108.

<sup>388</sup> Julian Novitz, 'Against Impossible Odds Supervillain Bodies in Austin Grossman's *Soon I Will Be Invincible* and Matt Carter's *Almost Infamous*', in *Superhero Bodies: Identity, Materiality, Transformation*, ed. by Wendy Haslem, Elizabeth MacFarlane, and Sarah Richardson (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018), pp. 96–116, p. 100; Taylor, 'He's Gotta Be Strong', pp. 350–58.

<sup>389</sup> Matek and Prtenjača, 'No Country for Old X-Men', p. 15.

disabled protagonists, who can be seen as both demythologised and reaffirmed.<sup>390</sup> Both interpretations imply the inevitability of ageing as an ominous bodily sign that links superhero masculinity with physical youthfulness, raising an interesting paradox about old superheroes and the implied loss of masculinity.

Developing on this concept, the threat of ageing, as observed by Brown and Petković, often resolves itself in heroic death that humanises the superheroes with vulnerability and redeems their ‘manliness’ with mystification.<sup>391</sup> However, as Batman’s publication history has illustrated, this conventional narrative of heroic death is more of a revolving door than a definitive answer. Several scholarly theses have expressed similar arguments that male superheroes tend to be resurrected or ‘magically brought back from the dead on a regular basis’, as, for the apparent necessity of commercial seriality, ‘death is rarely a permanent affair in superhero universes’.<sup>392</sup> Garret L. Castleberry also explains the psychological drive of heroic death and rebirth in superhero narratives as the satisfaction of an urge to rectify and cleanse wrongdoings.<sup>393</sup> When death lacks its due consequence, the circle of ageing, death and rebirth becomes a narrative about setback-rectification, which has little difference from the traditional superhero story about injuries and resilience or loss and recovery. In this type of storytelling, death is a plot device rather than a genuine threat.

Admittedly, although Bruce Wayne himself rarely dies beyond the necessity of plot designs, certain deaths are written with lasting gravity and impact, which define the character’s identity, the narrative development over a long period, and even the tone of the entire comic continuity. The murder of the Waynes, for example, is almost undisputedly the most important death event in Batman’s history. As Geoff Klock and Mitch Montgomery note, ‘Martha and Thomas Wayne’s murder is depicted in just about every Batman movie’.<sup>394</sup> This

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Danijela Petković, ‘(Im)Possible Martyrdom: Masculinity, Aging, Illness, and Death in Tombstone and Logan’, *Зборник Радова Филозофског Факултета у Приштини*, 48.3 (2018), pp. 121–50, doi:[10.5937/ZRFFP48-18623](https://doi.org/10.5937/ZRFFP48-18623); Jeffrey A. Brown, ‘I’m Too Old for This #&%’, p. 716.

<sup>392</sup> William Proctor, *Reboot Culture: Comics, Film, Transmedia* (London: Springer Nature, 2023), p. 129; Brown, *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity*, pp. 73, 111; Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), p. 175.

<sup>393</sup> Garret L. Castleberry, ‘The Cultural Context of Green Lantern: Superhero Commodity Rebirth, Renewal, and Rhetorical Extensions’, in *The DC Comics Universe: Critical Essays*, ed. by Douglas Brode (Jefferson: McFarland, 2022), pp. 122–35, p. 132.

<sup>394</sup> Geoff Klock and Mitch Montgomery, ‘Evolve or Die: Logan, Repetition and the Excesses of Tradition’, in *Superheroes and Excess: A Philosophical Adventure*, ed. by Jamie Brassett and Richard Reynolds, 1st edn (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 121–41, doi:[10.4324/9780203730065](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203730065), p. 121.

plot element, which is held in Time Warner's copyright protection, is more than frequently reused to build a character continuity exclusive to Batman stories: '[Time Warner] could use and reuse those elements to manufacture a new Batman film while excluding others from using them'.<sup>395</sup> In comics, too, the death of Batman's parents is almost a must-have element of each Batman series, which is argued to be the most important and consistent element of the Batman mythos and 'unalterable foundation upon which everything Batman is built'.<sup>396</sup> The weight of Bruce Wayne's loss of parents is not limited to the origin of his superhero career, but is also clearly reflected in how the grim-and-gritty traits in his personality, which are frequently related to his masculinity, are built on a response to childhood trauma.<sup>397</sup> Other significant deaths in Batman's life include, amongst many more, the sacrifice of Jason Todd in *Batman Vol 1 #427* (1988), the death of Damian Wayne in *Batman Incorporated Vol 2 #8* (2013), the twice-dead Alfred Pennyworth in *Detective Comics Vol 1 #328* (1964) and in *Batman Vol 3 #77* (2019).<sup>398</sup> In such a context, ageing and death become a nuanced and sensitive topic in superhero narratives. On the one hand, the protagonist rarely suffers from the direct threat of death but, on the other, the impact of death around him is a prominent theme in their story arcs.

This seemingly contradictory effect of ageing and death gives superhero comics one interesting possibility: as these elements can potentially be consequential, they can lead to fundamental changes in a superhero's development in less typical story arcs. Historically, Batman and Superman, representing the older generation of vulnerable male bodies, have

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<sup>395</sup> Claverie, *Copyright Vigilantes*, p. 18.

<sup>396</sup> Uricchio and Pearson, 'I'm Not Fooled by That Cheap Disguise', p. 194; Brown, *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity*, p. 199. Interestingly, six years after Brown's comment in *Multiplicity*, *Absolute Batman* (2024-) significantly revises Batman's origin story in an elseworld continuity and keeps Martha Wayne alive as a part of Bruce's civilian background. Since the Absolute Universe is an ongoing series published after the research of this thesis, I do not intend to include the Absolute Bruce Wayne in the main body of the thesis. Still, I believe it is fair to acknowledge its bold creativity, especially considering the overwhelmingly positive comments from reader communities.

<sup>397</sup> Jon K. Reid, 'Batman and Masked Grief', in *Superhero Grief* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 64–68; Phyllis Kosminsky, 'Bruce Wayne, Batman, and Attachment-Informed Grief Work', in *Superhero Grief* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 42–49

<sup>398</sup> Jim Starlin and others, 'A Death in the Family - Chapters III & IV', DC Comics, *Batman*, 1.427 (1988); Grant Morrison and others, 'The Boy Wonder Returns', DC Comics, *Batman Incorporated*, 2.8 (2013); Bill Finger, Sheldon Moldoff, and Joe Giella, 'Gotham Gang Line-Up', DC Comics, *Detective Comics*, 1.328 (1964); Tom King and others, 'City of Bane, Part 3', DC Comics, *Batman*, 3.77 (2013). The emphasis on 'significant' does imply that, whether intentionally or not, there are death events of Bat family characters written with much less seriousness and impact. For instance, in comparison to the earthquake of Jason Todd's first death, Jason's (unfortunately) repeated deaths in *Task Force Z* (2019) and *Batman Vol 3 #148* (2024) follow the heroic death rule, with him being resurrected and fully recovered on literally pages later.

both been written off to accommodate more radical interpretations of bodily masculinity.<sup>399</sup> Specifically to the characters themselves, when written in a grounded manner, the decay of their bodies also ignites responses and impacts that exceed mere repetitions about traditional heroism and masculinity. In *The Meaning of Superhero*, Wandtke comments that ‘fans still do mourn every time that Superman dies, apparently moved more by the pervasive impact of the current story than the impermanence of the event.’<sup>400</sup> This influence of a superhero’s demise, against a general background of non-consequential death, suggests a subversive potential in such plots, which inspires the following two case-studies of the revisionist narrative of ageing and death.

### 5.1.1 Fictional Gerontology and Masculine Monstrosity in *The Dark Knight Returns*

Novitz’s observation on DKR about aging as a reinforcement of superheroes and masculinity is a valid yet inconclusive entry point to approach its discussion on ageing: On the one hand, as Section 3.2.3 has illustrated, DKR is not exempt from reinforcing the essentialist connection among physical experiences, strength and masculinity — rather, DKR’s artist team has illustrated outstanding mastery of presenting this norm visually and narratively. On the other hand, its subversive exploration of the validity of individualist super-heroic villainism gives its exploration of ageing and vulnerability. In this section, I will analyse another example from DKR as well as a relevant ink page, published in the Noir Edition of DKR, and related sketches by Miller,<sup>401</sup> discussing the impact of the deconstructive narratives of masculinity in this series.

Starting from Frank Miller’s four-issue miniseries DKR, the ‘Dark Knight’ series evolves to be an independent fictional universe, Earth-66, parallel to the main universe with a more violent and ruthless twist in its worldview. Miller’s works are distinguished by his unique, expressionist art style, which powerfully complements the storytelling. Miller explains his motivation for interpreting Batman’s character image into a genuinely aged superhero as a reflective anxiety about the avoidance of ageing in superhero narratives: ‘[d]espite nearly

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<sup>399</sup> Jeffery, *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics*, p. 123.

<sup>400</sup> Wandtke, *The Meaning of Superhero Comic Books*, pp. 149-50.

<sup>401</sup> Miller and others, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986); Frank Miller, Lynn Varley, and Todd Klein, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, 1st ed. (New York: DC Comics, 2002); Frank Miller, *Batman Noir: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2015).

fifty years of continuous publication, there he was, unwrinkled, handsome, perpetually twenty-nine. [...] I'm poised to turn one year older than Batman.'<sup>402</sup> Taking inspiration from Dick Sprang's characterisation of a bulky Batman with exaggerated bulgy muscles, Miller's vision of DKR's aged Batman is someone grotesquely massive, worn out from punishment and with an appearance older than his age, rather than having a more energetic young body with a 'lean and masculine' physique, as Miller concludes.<sup>403</sup> Brooker further argues that Batman in DKR not only promotes a masculine ideal, but also is 'inherently playful, striking out from the accepted codes and breaking away from established conventions'.<sup>404</sup> With such a duality, this mini series portrays well-known superheroes — familiar to readers through established intertextual references — in a deliberately harsh and unflattering way, using visual style to add narrative depth that challenges the usual idealised, positive portrayals of superheroes.

In addition to the striking, painfully in-your-face visual expressions, DKR further challenges the previously fundamental preset conditions in superhero narratives with quests that have become more frequent to the 21st-century comic artists and readers. Setting its debate on the legitimacy of superhero vigilantism in a chaotic, politically corrupted Gotham, DKR follows the struggles of an ageing Bruce Wayne who comes out of retirement to once again become Batman. Batman's battles with disorders and injustice, aggravated from local gangs to his rogue gallery of supervillains, finally climaxed in a duel with Superman, who represented the interests of the Reagan government to repress Batman's unauthorised influence. The story ends with Batman faking his death, marking his final departure from the superhero role. He passes on the responsibility of protecting Gotham to grassroots, self-organised vigilantes — former gang members he once controlled and inspired to fight for justice. In DKR, Batman affords the duality of liberal vigilantism in his firm rejection of governmental control and conservative mindset in terms of his individualist effort to preserve the status quo of social orders and establish an alternative political system.<sup>405</sup> The complex in characters' symbolism reflects and then challenges the accumulation of Batman as a character, further

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<sup>402</sup> Miller and others, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 10th anniversary edition.

<sup>403</sup> Miller and others, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 30th anniversary edition.

<sup>404</sup> Will Brooker, 'The Best Batman Story', p. 40.

<sup>405</sup> Dubose, 'Holding Out for a Hero', pp. 915–35.

diminishing its significance based on DKR's complicated doubts about the validity of his subjective pursuit of justice.

To examine this challenging iteration's impact on Batman's performance of masculinity, the first extract is selected from DKR #2, p. 20, which preludes Batman's final battle against the leader of an outlaw Gotham gang named the Mutants. In this extract, Batman approached his opponent and decided to physically combat the mobsters' leader instead of eradicating the gang with heavy firearms, even if he found the evaluation of their physical conditions was not advantageous to him. This extract, commented as 'overtly homoeroticism' by Wilde,<sup>406</sup> applies theatrical physical conflicts as the materialisation of power plays, illustrating how the significance of normalised masculinity is deconstructed within the alienated gaze on repulsive bodily spectacles. More importantly, they push the almost definitive routine in superhero narratives in which the superhero stands for normalised values while the supervillain stands against them. According to Coogan, supervillains challenge and invert the commonly accepted norms and values 'to bring the normal activities of a society to a halt and force a hero to arise to defend those virtues'.<sup>407</sup> Contrary to this classic narrative, in the 'Dark Knight' series, whether a superhero stands for such norms is critically explored.

Finally, the 'Dark Knight' series holds a strong representativeness, making it worthwhile to be revisited as a case-study. As one of the most well-researched Batman stories, DKR attracts scholarly attention because of its complicated and ground-breaking reflection of superheroism, politics, ageing and gender issues: it is believed to mark the opening of the 'grim and gritty' archetype of superheroes.<sup>408</sup> Although the comics themselves do not necessarily intend for a more 'realistic' or 'dark' iteration, DKR has been established to represent one of the canonised iterations of 'good' Batman stories with its moral ambiguity and intellectual sophistication.<sup>409</sup> Moreover, starting from DKR, Frank Miller's effort in the 'Dark Knight' series is not limited to repeating or further exaggerating a dominant male

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<sup>406</sup> Wilde, 'Queer Matters in *the Dark Knight Returns*', p. 116; Tipton, 'Gender Trouble', p. 331.

<sup>407</sup> Peter Coogan, 'The Supervillain', in *The Supervillain Reader*, ed. by Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), pp. 36–61, p. 36.

<sup>408</sup> Mitch Frye, 'Seminar on the Purloined Batarang: Batman and Lacan', in *Riddle Me This, Batman!: Essays on the Universe of the Dark Knight*, ed. by Kevin K. Durand and Mary K. Leigh (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), p. 95.

<sup>409</sup> Proctor, *Reboot Culture*, pp. 195-298.

image. Rather, by ageing up the character to pass his prime time, the ‘Dark Knight’ series fixes Batman stories’ previous accumulations into a monument — something from the past rather than for the present. As Geoff Klock comments, DKR is the ‘first work in the history of superhero comics that attempts a synthesis of forty-five years of preceding Batman history in one place’.<sup>410</sup> Given their breadth and cultural significance, DKR provides a strong starting point for discussing the subversive potential of superhero comics.

### 5.1.1.1 Form analysis

Form 5.1.1-20 selects Panels 7-12 on p. 20 in the periodical version of DKR #2, out of consideration for a more easily tracked page number. The selected panels start from Batman examining the physique of his opponent, known as the Mutant Leader, from a telescope, and end with their actual confrontation.

Source: panels 7-12, p. 20, <i>The Dark Knight Returns</i> #2 (1986)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	...EXCEPT HE’S GOT EXACTLY THE KIND OF BODY I WISH HE DIDN’T HAVE...	Y	I	N
		... <b>POWERFUL</b> , WITHOUT ENOUGH <b>BULK</b> TO SLOW HIM DOWN...	Y	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N

<sup>410</sup> Geoff Klock, ‘The Revisionary Superhero Narrative’, in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. by Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 116–35, p. 116.

Panel 2	Verbal	<i>...EVERY MUSCLE A <b>STEEL SPRING--READY TO LASH OUT--</b></i>	Y	I	N
		<i>-- AND HE'S <b>YOUNG...</b></i>	Y	I	N
		<i>...IN HIS PHYSICAL <b>PRIME...</b></i>	Y	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Panel 3	Verbal	<i>...AND I HONESTLY DON'T KNOW IF I COULD <b>BEAT HIM,</b></i>	Y	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 4	Verbal	<i>MASTER BRUCE--YOU'VE SHUT DOWN THE WEAPONS!</i>	N	N	N
		CAN'T HAVE A BACK DOOR, ALFRED. MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO USE IT.	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Panel 5	Verbal	<i>SIR, YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS--</i>	Y	N	N
		<i>SIR...HE'LL KILL YOU--</i>	Y	N	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Panel 6	Verbal	COME ON, MAN--YOU BORIN ME--	N	N	S
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Small, evenly divided rectangle panels with black gutters; Panels 1, 2 and 5 use round boxes within the evenly segmented space.				
Narrative functions	Initial (Arc: Batman fought the Mutant Leader.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation		
	Y	A	S		

29\_Form 5.1.1-20 Batman observes the Mutant Leader, p. 20. *The Dark Knight Returns* #2.

### 5.1.1.2 De-masculinity vs othered masculinity

In the example from DKR, the power dynamic between the aged Batman and the Mutant Leader is constructed via Batman's validation of his opponent's youthful strength and his lack thereof, which is firstly built on the alignment and agreement between readers and the protagonist. To invoke readers' identification with the protagonist, the narration in Form 5.1.1-20 is largely carried in Batman's first-person perspective, channelling readers' gaze toward the antagonist through the lens of the protagonist. The verbal text establishes Batman as a first-person recitant with multimodal devices. Panels 1-3's verbal texts are italicised and set in rectangular boxes with a grey background, which, in addition to the clear reference of first-person recitation with 'I', suggests that the information it delivers should be read as Batman's subjective monologue rather than objective captions or dialogues. Panel 5's two verbal lines of Alfred Pennyworth — whose speech bubbles lack direction arrows and thus

no direct speakers are presented — overlap with the black circling panel that represents Batman's vision out of the single eye goggle he wore (Panel 4), suggesting it is also what Batman can hear from the first-person perspective.

In terms of the visuals, readers' viewing also merges with Batman's perspective to create an immersive experience. The extreme close-up of Batman's eye looking through the spectacle in Panel 1 smoothly transitions to the round shape of the panel borders in Panels 1-2 and 5, implying that many of the panels are direct depictions of Batman's subjective view. In Panels 5-6, by juxtaposing two panels with similar central objects of the Mutant Leader's face, the difference between having a circled border or not suggests the passing of time. In other words, in the narration, Batman had moved on from observation to facing his opponent, yet the visuals exclude the surroundings with extreme close-ups to create a fracture in the flow of movements. The transition in these two panels is achieved by McCloud's description of 'subject-to-subject',<sup>411</sup> meaning the connection between these two panels is largely established by the link between the central objects. The stilled, almost identical, objects do not imply a change in environment with continuous movements or an Orienter that gives contextual information. Rather, Panels 5-6 repeat a fixed viewing point across panels, emphasising a first-person, stream of consciousness experience and calling for readers' empathy.

Miller intended to write and pencil Batman as a contradiction of super-heroic resilience and dramatic comicalness,<sup>412</sup> which, in the narrative, is reflected in the underlying vulnerability and insecurity of the masculine-presenting protagonist. Showcased in *Sketchbook Frank Miller*, Miller's sketch ideas of DKR Batman's appearance, as illustrated in Graph 5.1.1-1, exaggerate facial features that are associated with toughness and commonly perceived as masculine.<sup>413</sup> On the other hand, his signature art style of roughness and geoaesthetics renders the characters with less idealistic or flattering features, marking his character image with artistic ugliness, visual unease and a hint of cynical doubt — 'Batman's form has become a kind of bloated self-parody which recalls Wally Wood's depiction of Superduperman', as

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<sup>411</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 74.

<sup>412</sup> Miller, and others, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 10th Anniversary edition.

<sup>413</sup> *Sketchbook Frank Miller*, ed. by Santiago Navarro (Barcelona: kaleidoscope, 1996), p 34

described by Michael Kobre.<sup>414</sup> Within the extract, the only two panels that show Batman's visual representation from a third-person viewing point are Panels 3-4. Panel 3 is an extreme close-up that strongly focuses on Batman's facial expression. The determination in the face, along with Miller's geometrical, sketch-like stylisation that emphasises toughness in the character's rendering, contrasts with the verbal text's uncertainty: 'I honestly don't know if I could *beat* him'. The contradictory text-image relation presents the layered mentality of the protagonist: on the one hand, he was not confident enough because of his age, but on the other, physically combating the Mutant Leader is inevitable if he wants to establish his authority. This moment of hesitation humanises Batman with subtle vulnerability, making his character image relatable under an identifying gaze. Panel 4's visual mildly steps away from the reader-character unity into a burst-up shot, which keeps readers within a close range to the character. As a Prolongation that extends Panel 3's self-doubt, this panel pauses Batman's evaluative inner monologue to highlight the facial expression of determination, forming a contrast between his toughness, recognised by others, and the risks only known to himself.

Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions

*6\_Graph 5.1.1-1 Sketches of Batman and Bruce Wayne for the Dark Knight series, Sketchbook Frank Miller, p. 34.*

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<sup>414</sup> Michael Kobre, 'Only Transform: The Monstrous Bodies of Superheroes', in *Superhero Bodies: Identity, Materiality, Transformation*, ed. by Wendy Haslem, Elizabeth MacFarlane, and Sarah Richardson (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018), pp. 149–60, p. 154.

By admitting the diminishing prowess of ageing, the gaze from the Batman-reader union recognises the Mutant Leader's higher power position, forming a contrast between a de-masculinised hero and a masculine villain. Briefly, Panels 3-4 offer a slight alienation from Batman to allow an observation outside of the protagonist's mindset. The comparison between the lack of confidence delivered in Panel 3 and the sturdy facial expression in Panel 4 illustrates the performative nature of masculinity, setting a baseline that normative masculinity is fluidly decided by actions rather than inseparably innate to a character's heroic identity. As for the antagonist, Panels 1-2 and 5-6 directly present the villain's body from Batman's perspective. The bodily image is fragmented into pieces, including a shoulder, an arm and a face, all drawn as bulky chunks with tensed gestures displaying physical strength. In Panels 5-6, the antagonist's inhumanly sharp teeth emphasise his monstrosity, especially as the panning-in shift in panel framing suggests an imminent threat. This effect is more obvious to observe in the *Noir Edition* of these panels (Graph 5.1.1-2), where the graphic, flattened stylisation of the teeth becomes even more striking without the distraction of colours in the ink work. In Coogan's categorisations of 'the monster', 'the enemy commander', 'the mad scientist' and 'the inverted-superhero',<sup>415</sup> the Mutant Leader's grotesque body and aggressive strength almost self-evidently label him as 'the monster'. However, his social status, as the leader of non-state armed groups, and the comparison between Batman and his physiques give this character extra elements that echo Batman's status quo. This counterpart character design makes the Mutant Leader also an 'enemy commander' and, more importantly, Batman's mirror as 'the inverted-superhero', reflecting Coogan's argument that '[s]upervillains can represent a displaced aspect of the hero that the hero struggles with.'<sup>416</sup> Here, the Mutant Leader's monstrous masculinity becomes a distorted reflection of the youthful strength Batman used to possess.

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<sup>415</sup> Coogan, *The Supervillain*, pp. 36-45.

<sup>416</sup> Coogan, *The Supervillain*, p. 57.

Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions

*7\_Graph 5.1.1-2 Ink page of the Mutant Lead, Batman Noir: The Dark Knight Returns, p. 72.*

With the protagonist's attention directed to body parts that emphasise monstrous strength, the connection between aggressive physicality and villainy is created and recognised by readers' identification with the protagonist. In addition to the visuals, the verbal texts also focus on bodily features and their relevance in competing for authority. In the observation that strips away a character's identity as a person, what the protagonist noticed is a '**powerful**' body '**in his physical prime**' (Panels 2-3). The whole dehumanising evaluation is built on both the expectation of a fight in the narrative arc and the wordings that imply competing, such as the bold front words '**prime**' and '**beat**' (Panels 3-4). Miller intentionally gave the mutant leaders a specific way of speaking by imitating Mr. T, an American actor and former wrestler who had become active in the entertainment business since 1985, and used a unique set of jargon shared between the mutants.<sup>417</sup> With the protagonist's confirmation that the antagonist out-competes him in physical conditions, the legitimacy of Batman's hierarchy

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<sup>417</sup> Miller and others, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 10th anniversary edition.

over another male leader-type character ('... I can't think of a single reason to let him live' as Batman reasoned about the Mutant Leader's fate before their fight) is overthrown. This narrative correlates an ideal male body to a high position in a power dynamic. Such physical strength, which only belonged to a young man's body in this context, weakens the protagonist's masculinity while being visualised as malicious by the antagonist. Thus, the sheer contrast of youth with monstrous physicality, and old age with inferiority, deconstructs the positivity in masculinity. It is no longer perceived as a shared feature between readers and the protagonist in their alliance of self-identification, but something that either withers when a man's body is no longer as strong or is possessed by an alienated monster.

#### 5.1.1.4 Evaluation

As a revolutionary milestone in superhero history, DKR confront the anxieties of ageing about becoming powerless and demasculinised, representing a perceived disqualification from superhero status due to a failure to embody normalised masculinity. Ultimately, the 'Dark Knight' series does not merely reflect on ageing; it directly challenges the very notion that masculinity is essential, desirable, or even relevant to the legitimacy of a superhero identity. DKR Batman is a character full of contradictions: retired yet active, vulnerable as an old man but ultra-resilient as a superhero, resolute to enforce individualist vigilantism, but also degenerative as a stubborn totalitarian regime leader — 'a flat cultural construction capable of containing contradictory meanings'.<sup>418</sup> In his conflicting negotiation with ageing and masculinity, even when the ageing hero's physical decline is reframed as greater resilience, the bleak, almost nihilistic, portrayal of monstrous hypermasculinity raises a deeper challenge that shakes the significance and dominance of masculinity that has been self-evidently prevailing in superhero comics. In superhero comics' conventional establishment of hegemonic masculinity, 'supervillain bodies are frequently used to reinforce dominant ideologies by showcasing the nonideal in contrast to the positively portrayed hypermasculine attributes presented by the bodies of superheroes'.<sup>419</sup> By stripping the protagonist's body of its idealisation and symbolic representativeness, DKR uses ageing as a sign of diminished physical dominance, mourning the decline of an idealised image of

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<sup>418</sup> Terrence R. Wandtke, 'Frank Miller Strikes Again and Batman Becomes a Postmodern Anti-Hero: The Tragi(Comic) Reformulation of the Dark Knight', in *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, ed. by Terrence R. Wandtke (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), pp. 87–111, p. 88.

<sup>419</sup> Novitz, 'Against Impossible Odds', p. 98.

masculinity. Indeed, it confirms the legitimacy of the presentations of masculinity in bodily images. However, by disassociating manliness, physicality and virtue, DKR rejects the protagonist and his aligned readers from embodying gendered traits by ruling over the antagonist with sole physical advantage. With the correlation between young men's bodies and monstrosity, the antagonist's performance of manliness is also denied as undesirable.

### 5.1.2 'Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader' and the Deconstruction of Heroic Death

Origin stories, by nature, require being constantly revisited as an event in the past to provide a stable seriality for the present, but, contradictorily, they are also under flexible rewriting to reflect and accommodate the expansion and transformation of the stories newly added to the series.<sup>420</sup> Within the circle of birth/life/death narratives, as Jeffrey McCambridge argues, retelling existing origin stories is not a mere repetition but a discovery of potentialities that promise 'new creations and new destructions'.<sup>421</sup> To explore the subversion of gender representation in death and rebirth, this section analyses another version of Batman's origin story, the death of Martha and Thomas Wayne, in 'Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader' (referred to as 'the Caped Crusader').<sup>422</sup> Written by Neil Gaiman in 2009 and initially published as a two-issue short story in *Batman Vol 1 #686* and *Detective Comics Vol 1 #853*, 'the Caped Crusader' represents a sentimental reflection of masculine heroism, enriching the previous binarism of triumphant strength and tragic fragility. Narrated by key characters in Batman's history, the first half of the three-issue series gives multiple versions of this hero's possible death scenarios, presenting a Rashomon effect of interpretations of what the hero appears to be in a public sphere. After accumulating possible examples of Batman's ending to represent this character's cultural legacy, the story moves into Batman's first-person perspective and resolves in a rebirth of the superhero. In Pagello's observation

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<sup>420</sup> Pagello, 'The "Origin Story" is the Only Story', p. 729

<sup>421</sup> Jeffrey McCambridge, 'Ratoon, Remontant, Revenant, or Recorporation Death, Melancholy, and Mourning in DC's The Saga of the Swamp Thing', in *The DC Comics Universe: Critical Essays*, ed. by Douglas Brode (Jefferson: McFarland, 2022), pp. 146–57, p. 148.

<sup>422</sup> The author is aware of the recent controversies surrounding Neil Gaiman, which are particularly relevant given the subject matter of this thesis. However, it should be emphasised that the following analysis is based solely on textual readings of his past publications and does not engage with, reflect upon, or take a position on the present controversies in question. Neil Gaiman, Andy Kubert, and Scott Williams, 'Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader? (Part 1)', *DC Comics*, Batman, 1.686 (2009); Neil Gaiman, Andy Kubert, and Scott Williams, 'Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader? (Part 2)', *DC Comics*, Detective Comics, 1.853 (2009).

on superhero origins, rebooting and retelling origin stories are a typical strategy to avoid the end of a superhero narrative, reinforcing the comic norm that ‘the serial structure of classical superhero fiction aimed to bypass the inevitability of the end and the irreversibility of time and death.’<sup>423</sup> Contrary to this writing pattern, ‘the Caped Crusader’ incorporates the contradiction of endless rebooting and the finality of a hero’s death in one origin story, which gives it a reformative space to reflect on superheroism. Aiming at highlighting and exploring this reconstructing potential, the selected case-studies are centred on the Peak of Batman’s self-reflection before his death, illustrating how a less gendered parent-child dynamic replaces masculinity as a component in the superhero identity. In this process, readers’ identification is gradually aligned with the protagonist from the detachment in the sections of viewing the protagonist’s masculinity, further confirming the deconstruction of gendered features in superhero narratives.


Since the case-studies of ‘the Caped Crusader’ cover 6 pages, for the convenience of reference, the analytical forms and discussions are grouped into two parts based on their narrative progress. The first part, pp. 49-51, concludes Batman’s key life moments and influence; in other words, his interactions with other people and society. The second part analyses pp. 52 and 57-58, which give a more intimate, personal reflection on his death.

#### 5.1.2.1 Form analysis for pp. 49-51

Following multiple small arcs in a funeral scene that presents Batman’s possible ways of dying, the conclusive section of Batman’s death unfolds on pp. 49-51. This section uses a collage effect on full-page illustrations to synthesise the key elements in Batman’s cultural legacy as a character image, emphasising the values and themes traditionally associated with male heroes. The three forms in this section, including Forms 5.1.2-49, 5.1.2-50 and 5.1.2-51, record these three pages accordingly.

Source: panel 1, p. 49, <i>Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader</i> (2009)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	‘I’VE LEARNED... THAT IT DOESN’T MATTER WHAT THE	N	I	N

<sup>423</sup> Pagello, ‘The “Origin Story” is the Only Story’, p. 730.

		STORY IS, <i>SOME</i> THINGS NEVER CHANGE.			
		“BECAUSE EVEN WHEN THEY AREN’T TALKING ABOUT <i>ME</i> , THEY <i>ARE</i> .”	N	I	N
		“BECAUSE THEY’RE TALKING ABOUT <i>BATMAN</i> .”	N	I	N
		“THE BATMAN DOESN’T COMPROMISE.”	N	I	N
		“I KEEP THIS CITY SAFE...”	N	I	N
		“EVEN IF IT’S SAFER BY JUST <i>ONE</i> PERSON...”	N	I	N
		“AND I DO <i>NOT</i>	N	I	N
		<i>EVER</i>	N	I	N
		“GIVE IN	N	I	N
		“OR GIVE UP.”	N	I	N
	Multi	PD	N	N	N
	Visual	  Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Full-page illustration; a silhouette of Batman frames the key object.				
Narrative functions	Peak (Arc: Batman's funeral)				
	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation

Gaze relevance	Y	I	N
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30\_Form 5.1.2-49 Batman's reflection on his duty, p. 49. *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader*.

Source: panel 1, p. 50, <i>Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader</i> (2009)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	“SOMETIMES I FALL IN <b>BATTLE</b> .”	N	I	N
		“SOMETIMES I DIE <b>HUGELY</b> , BRAVELY, <b>SAVING</b> THE CITY FROM SOMETHING THAT WOULD DESTROY IT.”	N	I	N
		“SOMETIMES IT’S A <b>SMALL</b> , IRONIC, UNNOTICED DEATH — I DIE RESCUING A CHILD FROM A FIRE, OR TACKLING A FRIGHTENED PICKPOCKET.”	N	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Full-page illustration; a silhouette of Batman frames the key object; repetitive objects of various sizes.				
Narrative functions	Prolongation (Arc: Batman's funeral)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		I		N

31\_Form 5.1.2-50 Batman's reflection on his death's significance, p. 50. Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader.

Source: panel 1, p. 51, <i>Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader</i> (2009)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	“EVERYTHING CHANGES, NOTHING STAYS THE SAME.	N	I	N
		“EVERY FRIEND BETRAYS ME, SOONER OR LATER, AND EVERY ENEMY BECOMES A LOVER OR A FRIEND, BUT THAT’S THE ONE THING THAT DOESN’T CHANGE:	N	I	Y
		“I DON’T EVER GIVE UP.	N	I	N
		“I <i>CAN’T</i> GIVE UP.		I	N
		“I’M THE BATMAN. I PROTECT THE CITY. I RESCUE PEOPLE. INVESTIGATE CRIMES. I GUARD THE INNOCENT. I CORRECT THE GUILTY.	N	I	N
		“AND I <i>GET</i> IT.	N	I	N
		“I MEAN, I <i>REALLY</i> GET IT.	N	I	N
		“THE END OF THE STORY OF BATMAN IS, HE’S <i>DEAD</i> . BECAUSE, IN THE END, THE BATMAN DIES. WHAT <i>ELSE</i> AM I GOING TO DO? RETIRE AND PLAY GOLF? IT DOESN’T WORK THAT WAY. IT <i>CAN’T</i> . I FIGHT UNTIL I DROP. AND ONE DAY, I <i>WILL</i> DROP.	N	I	N
		“BUT UNTIL THEN, I <i>FIGHT</i> .”	N	I	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions		Y	A	Y
Cross-panel Elements						
Spatial-topical parameters	Full-page illustration; a silhouette of Batman frames the key object; repetitive objects of various sizes; colouring as a vague panel divider.					
Narrative functions	Prolongation (Arc: Batman's funeral)					
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation	
	Y		I		N	

32\_Form 5.1.2-51 Batman's reflection on his life's significance, p. 51. *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader.*

### 5.1.2.2 Observing and questioning established norms

In the first half of the extract, pp. 49-51 reach the end of the tension built in the various contradictory versions of Batman's death, concluding the accumulated interpretations of his character image, for example, as a protector of the city, a crime-fighting vigilante and an adventurous heroic figure, as illustrated in these three pages. With a regulated, geometrical panorama, p. 49 presents the territory under Batman's protection with a Batman cape symbolising his watching over the city. The following p. 50 shows wounded bodies of the protagonist with orange lighting against the compensatory colour as shadowed areas to create a sense of warmth and positivity. Both pages actively reflect of Batman's contribution and death, re-affirming the monologues' satisfactory tone that validates masculine heroism as uncompressed crusade despite the sacrifice, especially when the death scenes on p. 50 are all dramatic or epic to expand the verbal text's depiction of '*battle*' and '*die hugely*' rather than '*it's a small, ironic, unnoticed death*'. On p. 51, the bodily presentation turns from straightforward presentation in intensive conflicts to more passive scenarios, such as hiding,

defending, and invasive injuries. Following such a change, the verbal lines develop to be more pessimistic about the unavoidable death in superhero narratives ('I fight until I drop. And one day, I *will* drop'). The role as a superhero, especially the resilient masculinity in his hero identity, becomes a 'must' rather than a 'can' ('I *can't* give up'). Thus, this is a shift from an unquestioned presentation to a somewhat painful realisation of a possible deeper motive hiding behind the common understanding of Batman's cause. Moreover, in several verbal lines, Batman alienates his vigilante persona with himself by self-referencing in a third-person pronoun, 'the Batman'. This awareness and self-alienation create a space that splits Batman into two identities and complicates the streamlined reader-character projection. In other words, as an individual who is as ordinary as the viewer, Bruce Wayne's civilian identity stands between the ultrahuman hero and the reader, destabilising the essential norm in superhero narratives that a superhero identity is innate in the character and cannot be separated from his existence.

When recalling key moments and components in Batman's history, verbal texts and images show frequent discrepancies between identifying as the protagonist and observing his history from an outsider's perspective. As the analytical forms suggest, all the verbal lines are marked as encouraging identification because they address the protagonist as 'I' and are put into quotation marks and square boxes, implying that they are not audible dialogues in round boxes — like the verbal texts listed on p. 52's form — but inner monologues only known by the protagonist himself. In other words, the readers are supposed to receive the monologue in a different way than hearing it, which is clarified as unspoken thoughts by the change of narrative perspective since p. 49. As the first page of the Peak of Batman's personal reflection on his life significance, judging by the tone of speech, the single-panel illustration on p. 49 follows Batman's first-person perspective as the recitant, even if the text layout and speech bubbles do not visually link to the character. The ambiguity of the channel for delivering such information, as well as the continued first-person perspective across modalities, gives readers a chance to align themselves with the hero and subjectively identify with his string of thoughts rather than view him explaining his thinking.

On the other hand, the visuals of the three pages are carried out by a third-person monstrator; in other words, from an outside observer's perspective. Within all three single panels, visual representations are viewed with a sense of detachment, which is induced by abstraction (for example, eyeholes on the Batsuit mask as a representative of the character on p. 49) and long shots that imply physical distance between the reader and the character. On the narration

level, the juxtaposed repetitions of Batman as the central objects suggests a chronological development. However, a lack of a clear borderline of panels includes these images in one large frame, making them also appear to be simultaneous events. The contradiction between time pacing in content and format creates an almost surreal synchronicity, which presents all the tragic moments in Batman's life for examination in an overwhelming manner.

Moreover, the visual techniques relevant to bodily images, especially bodies in compromised situations, co-exist with such alienation. For example, p. 50 features four critically wounded bodies of the protagonist, heavily emphasised with physical distortion, painful facial expressions and dramatic light/shadow divisions; piling up bodies in the same scene further reinforces the strikingness of such suffering. P. 51 brings a romantic aspect into Batman's reflection of his history, tying up the masculinity as an unsettling part of being a male hero without encouraging identification. On this page, only the word 'lover' is visualised among all the verbal texts about alliance and betrayal, which makes the text and image partially repetitive as an emphasis. The contrast between the more saturated-coloured bodies at the lower centre of the illustration and the rest of the image also highlights the kissing pair as the central objects attracting attention. Batman's body, toned with cold beige and sharp lighting, is clearly shown as half-naked but hidden under a heavily shadowed mask and the female figure's body. The duality of exposing and shying away from the readers' gaze, plus the gloomy undertone in the drawing, suggests an affirmation of sexuality within Batman's superhero identity; but, at the same time, the visual rejects positive identification to share such a romantic experience.

What unifies the verbal and visual texts is that the verbal texts evolve on the verbal metaphor of physical conflicts, which aligns with the heavily loaded bodily presentations in the visual texts. For example, on pp. 50–51, Batman's inner monologues on fighting are juxtaposed with visual depictions of combat. This pairing creates a double meaning: the scenes represent not only the immediate physical conflict, but also an abstract, lifelong struggle that defines his character; and the symbolic meaning of such a struggle will be the anchor point of the story's later development. Although the literal meaning of the texts do not actively engage with the topic of physique, its expanding relation, its expanding relation with the images directs readers' attention to the link between a character's existential goal and physical conflicts, quickly summarising the heroism commonly understood in superhero narratives. It not only links male sexuality with heroism to confirm it as a gendered concept, but also changes the only tender scene on these memory-tracing pages into a melancholy recall of

'everything changes'. Thus, these three pages create a reading experience in which readers could be empathetic to the struggles in Batman's self-reasoning but comparatively dispassionate about the results of such thinking, exposing the protagonist's dissatisfaction with the common perception of what it means to be a superhero.

### *5.1.2.3 Form analysis for pp. 52 and 57-58*

From p. 52, the challenge to masculine heroism steps further from reviewing its passive nature, returning the 'super' in the superhero narrative to more humane, personal experience. Led again by the interaction between Martha Wayne and Batman, pp. 52-56 recall Bruce Wayne's origin story: a happy childhood, his parents' death, and his becoming of a vigilante. After accepting death, and thus the ending of the passively performed heroism on p. 56, Batman and Martha returned to the funeral scene, and Batman brought closure to his current life and became an infant again as Bruce Wayne (pp. 57-63). This section focuses more on Batman's subjectivity and agency, exploring the significance of emotions and well-being rather than more conventional themes that are traditionally associated with a masculine superhero identity, such as duty and sacrifice. In the following forms, Form 5.1.2-52, closely examine all panels on p. 52 where Batman breaks out of the flashback collages. For a more accessible layout, the panels, which would be unreadably thin and elongated otherwise, are analysed as Panels 1-2 and 3-4.

Source: panels 1-4, p. 52, <i>Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader</i> (2009)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panels 1-2	Verbal	THAT'S RIGHT, BRUCE. YOU DO. YOU FIGHT UNTIL IT'S DONE. AND THEN YOU DIE.	N	N	N
		WHEN THEY CAN FIND A BODY, THEY...THEY PUT YOU IN A COFFIN.	Y	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N N	A A	N D
Panels 3-4	Verbal	UNTIL THEN YOU KEEP FIGHTING. BECAUSE YOU <b>HAVE</b> TO. BECAUSE YOU <b>CAN'T</b> STOP IT FROM HAPPENING AGAIN.	N	N	N
		BECAUSE, NO MATTER <b>HOW</b> MANY LIVES YOU SAVE, YOU CAN'T BRING US <b>BACK</b> .	N	N	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions		Y Y	A I	D D
Cross-panel Elements						
Spatial-topical parameters	Parallel 4 panels divided by abstract shapes of a batwing.					
Narrative functions	Release (Arc: Batman's funeral)					
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation	
	N		I		N	

33-Form 5.1.2-52 Martha reveals Batman's core motivation, p. 52. *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader*.

Then, two forms, including Forms 5.1.2-57 and 5.1.2-58, cover all panels on pp. 57-58, which depict Batman returning to childhood and accepting his fate in his near-death hallucinations.

Source: panels 1-3, p. 57, <i>Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader</i> (2009)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	ARE YOU READY TO LET IT GO NOW? TO MOVE ON?	N	N	N

		TO GO TO MY FINAL REWARD? I TOLD YOU, MOM, I DON'T <b>BELIEVE</b> IN--	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	YOU DON'T GET HEAVEN OR HELL. DO YOU KNOW THE ONLY REWARD YOU GET FROM BEING BATMAN? YOU GET TO BE <b>BATMAN</b> .	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Panel 3	Verbal	AND--WHEN YOU'RE A CHILD--YOU GET A HANDFUL OF YEARS OF REAL HAPPINESS, WITH YOUR FATHER, WITH ME. IT'S MORE THAN <b>SOME</b> PEOPLE GET. YOU'RE <b>DONE</b> , NOW, BRUCE, THIS TIME. YOU CAN STOP FIGHTING NOW...JUST FOR A FEW MORE YEARS... IT'S <b>OVER</b> .	N	N	D
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N

Cross-panel Elements			
Spatial-topical parameters	No clear gutter; Large panels; Using a book to divide fictional content within a fiction.		
Narrative functions	Orienter (Arc: Batman lost consciousness.)		
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
	N	I	N

34-Form 5.1.2-57 Martha guides Batman to accept his death, p. 57. *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader*.

Source: panels 1-3, p. 58, <i>Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader</i> (2009)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	LET IT GO.	N	N	N
		MOM?	N	N	D
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	REMEMBER THE GOOD NIGHT BOOK, BRUCE?	N	N	D
		IT'S JUST LIKE THAT. YOU REMEMBER.	N	N	D
		IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO SAY GOODNIGHT.	N	N	D
		SAY IT...	N	N	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 3	Verbal	GOODNIGHT, HOUSE.	N	I	D
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	I	D
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	No clear gutter; Large panels; Using a book to divide fictional content.				
Narrative functions	Initial (Arc: Batman lost consciousness.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		I		N

35-Form 5.1.2-58 *Batman's hallucination of closing his life story as a child, p. 58. Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader.*

#### 5.1.2.4 Reconstructing significance in superhero masculinity

After destabilising the superiority and unquestionable embodiment of the superhero identity, the following narrative engages more with identifying gazes to develop an empathetic understanding of its reformative interpretations. As Forms 5.1.2-52 and 5.1.2-57 illustrate, the first three panels of these two pages have a similar composition development, rapidly bringing readers from a faraway position into a more participative viewing. Starting from a bird-eye view shot, Panel 1 in both forms serves as Orienters to prepare the reader with an alienated observation of the environment. The setting is toned with surrealism, as the abstract black and blue background on p. 52 resonates with p. 57's half-translucent night sky that overlays a realistic representation of the funeral hall. When the composition moves closer to

the characters in the following panels, the proportion of the background shrinks while the more realistic representations of Batman and Martha become the centre of attention. By encouraging readers to overlook the less realistic parts in the visual, this change in attention induces an underlying tension hidden in a gradually developed focus that invades the characters' interaction, creating an implied first-person hallucinating experience regardless of the third-person monstration. On p. 52, this sense of instability leads to the merging of the readers' gaze and Batman's viewing perspective in Panel 4, fulfilling such an expectation and creating a strong identification with the protagonist.

Then, on p. 58, the first panel breaks the pattern of growing identification viewing, which dramatically alienates readers from the protagonist to visualise the despair of abandonment. When the visual in Panel 1, Form 5.1.2-58 pulls away the focal point and renders the image into a panorama composition. The background also abruptly changes from substantial representations of the funeral scene into abstract geometrical shapes, which are revealed to be Martha Wayne's hat on the next page, but are nonetheless almost unrecognisable in this panel. The vague light-blue dots in Panels 1-3 in Form 5.1.2-57, which are read as stars following the last frame, are also solidified into highlighted dots against a dark, unicoloured background as a starry sky. This change breaks the illusion of a continuing background of the funeral hall. This fantastical, dream-like scene change intensifies the shift from the two closely examined bodies of Batman in wrist-level shots to a tiny figure floating in a vast, space-like environment, which drastically emphasises the confusion and helplessness the character would feel in this situation. Moreover, the speech bubble of Martha Wayne changes from an arrowed bubble to a full oval. While the verbal text in Panel 1, Form 5.1.2-58 is an imperative sentence and likely a direct speech, the change in the bubble shape implies that the source of the speaker becomes unknown or unseen, hiding the mother/guide figure from both the readers and Batman. Thus, even if the composition and panel alignment severely alienate readers from the protagonist, the sadness of abandonment is delivered in the visual development and textual presentation.

By far, the narrative before p. 57 has laid a foundation for recognising the theme of the conclusive part of the narrative, which restores Batman as a superhero to Bruce Wayne as a child. The intimacy between Batman and Martha Wayne is visibly marked with gendered features and is yet significantly demasculinised. Batman's visual representation is depicted as a mature male-presenting figure, while Martha, feminine and dainty compared to him, is also presented as a similar age. Under Batman's first-person gaze in close-ups, such as Panel

4 in Form 5.1.2-52, the contrast of gendered features should have enticed a subtle appreciation of Martha Wayne's femininity, which in the narrative is suppressed by their mother-son relationship and Martha's higher power position as a spiritual guide. For example, in Panel 2, Form 5.1.2-58, her final words to Batman in the verbal texts are all imperative sentences. Her verbal dominance is further reinforced by the dramatic size differences in her surreally enormous face and the small figure of Batman.

In this dynamic, even if Batman's inner monologue alienates his Batman persona out of the I-reader equation, Martha's repetitively addressing Batman as Bruce confirms the unification of his two identities, solidifying the following resolution of his self-understanding. The last two panels of p. 58 transition from Batman as the third-person monstrator to a first-person monstration that unifies Batman and the readers' viewing perspective, which strongly evokes the reader's identification with the protagonist and thus a recognition of the revision in his superheroism. In Panel 2, Form 5.1.2-58, Batman is positioned in a panorama that distances him from readers, yet his orientation towards Martha, with his back to the focal point, aligns the audience's gaze with his. Moreover, the unrealistically large phantom of Martha's face is placed at the centre of the panel and takes up more than 4/5 of the panel's composition, attracting readers' attention from Batman's figure at the corner. The illusion of readers directly viewing Martha's face as a first-person monstrator allows the following merge of readers' and Batman's focal points from Panel 3 in Form 5.1.2-58 and onwards. Moreover, the last two panels on p. 58 are not restricted by gutters or borders in a typical comic layout, but the hand and book-shaped outlines at the 1/3 bottom of the page form a box-like structure that separates the image within from the overall frame that depicts Batman's near-death hallucination. With this panel design, the viewing experience is filtered through a child's perspective, who is implied to be a rejuvenated Bruce Wayne, given the earlier discussion of childhood and the parent-child dynamic. By concluding Batman's ending as a revisit of childhood, the brief recap of Batman's past achievements is re-interpreted as a children's book examined by the protagonist and readers alike, deconstructing masculine heroism into a child's response to their traumatic experience of losing parents — a universal motif appealing to genderless empathy.

#### *5.1.2.5 Evaluation*

David Mazzucchelli, the comic artist behind *Batman: Year One*, once expressed his perception of Bruce Wayne's vigilante career: a child's attempt to reconcile with the life-

changing trauma he experienced in his own world — ‘a preadolescent world’.<sup>424</sup> This comment is largely reflected in the narrative of *the Caped Crusader*, where Batman’s superhero masculinity is concluded, questioned and reassigned with a genderless representation. The case-study, selected from the climactic conflict of his struggle to be a socially recognised superhero in public and his personal longing for his family loss in childhood. During the review of Batman’s identity as a superhero, readers’ gaze on his body in visual texts is characterised by a gender-relevant context and a consistent alienation, which offers an objective viewing experience that concludes the existing link between hypermasculinity and the superhero narrative. The verbal texts, on the other hand, reveal a private mental struggle hidden within the façade of Batman’s public identity, appealing to the reader’s empathy with a first-person narrative. In the next extract, the tension between Batman’s role as a superhero and his identity as Bruce Wayne is resolved by framing his vigilante drive as an expression of love and grief for his parents. This resolution symbolically returns Batman to his childhood, offering closure to his inner conflict while softening the masculine emphasis of his character and desexualising the superheroism he represents.

## 5.2 Alternative Masculinity: Camp and Queerness

The Batman series has always been a site of controversy over alternative masculinity with respect to homosociality and camp. Discussed in greater details in Chapter One, the debates over Batman’s homosexual potential have provided an interesting overview of how, since the Golden Age, the strong implications of same-sex intimacy have been interwoven in the narrative of many of his interpersonal relationships, such as those with friends, family members, co-workers, enemies — if such relationships can be categorised into typical ‘types’ at all. In the larger context of the USA literature, male bonding in ‘buddy storylines’ is an established tradition, which exemplifies the potential of homosociality that threatens the stability of both the homosexual and non-sexual ends of the sexuality continuum.<sup>425</sup> It is not surprising that comics as literature also share this prototype of character dynamics, opening up more possibilities in superheroes’ gender performance for sexual ambiguity. Without a doubt, Batman comics have made a significant effort to demonstrate Bruce Wayne’s sexual and romantic attraction to women — sometimes, such intention becomes so elaborate that it

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<sup>424</sup>Mazzucchelli, ‘Afterword(s)’.

<sup>425</sup> Tipton, ‘Gender Trouble’, p. 323.

is perceived to be more of a desire for performance than a desire generated from sexuality.<sup>426</sup> To centralise dominant masculinity, superhero narratives reject domestication in heterosexual romances, hindering heterosexual attractions from developing into tangible, sustained bonds. As Sarah Torres commented, ‘[a] lot of the pleasure Batman offers his consumers - gay and straight, male and female - comes precisely from his sexual undecidability.’<sup>427</sup> The struggle between the long-standing homosociality and the more-or-less invalid heteronormativity renders Batman’s representation of sexuality a flexible site open to interpretation and attractive to readers of various interests.

Intersecting with sexuality, but not limited to romantic dynamics, camp aesthetics is another recurring element in Batman’s history that promises an even wider space for the Batman series to explore unconventional gender expressions as a dominant man. The most representative work of ‘the Camp Crusader’ — a jargon half-jokingly used by Batman researchers to describe the comical, humorous and somewhat plastic iterations of the Caped Crusader — is almost undisputedly the film *Batman* (1966) and the following TV series (1966-1968) featuring Adam West and Burt Ward as Batman and Robin.<sup>428</sup> However, the camp tradition of Batman comics had been long established before Adam West’s film representation. In a broader context, the Silver Age comics in general leaned more heavily toward the comical nature of comics, meaning they typically tend to explore funny and fantastical elements in a larger-than-life story arc.<sup>429</sup> Intervolved with the Silver Age trend of comic writing, Batman comics in the 1960s typically were toned with parodical mockery and exaggerations of authoritative and mainstream concepts — always for fun, never bitterly. As observed by Brooker, the 1960s Batman ‘had already embraced elements of comedy, dual address and self-consciousness, and had exhibited Pop and camp tendencies before the TV series was even in development.’<sup>430</sup> The broad popularity of the camp iteration of Batman led to ‘with a phenomenal rush of licensing revenues from toys and other products,

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<sup>426</sup> Richardson, *Batman and the Joker*, pp. 24-34.

<sup>427</sup> Torres, ‘The Caped Crusader of Camp’, p. 339.

<sup>428</sup> Proctor, *Reboot Culture*, pp. 8, 87, 196; Eileen R. Meeham, ‘“Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!”: The Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext’, in *Many More Lives of the Batman*, ed. by Roberta Pearson, William Uricchio, and Will Brooker (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), pp. 69–94; *Batman*, dir. by William Dozier (Los Angeles: 20th Century-Fox, 1966).

<sup>429</sup> Brown, *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity*, p. 161; Dennis O’Neil, ‘Introduction’, in *Batman Unauthorized: Vigilantes, Jokers, and Heroes in Gotham City* (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2008), pp. 1-7, p. 4.

<sup>430</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, pp. 176, 186.

and the compliment of imitations in every medium’, ultimately leaving an almost indelible mark on Batman’s history — one that endured even as DC Comics deliberately moved away from camp toward a ‘grim and gritty’ type of vigilante characters represented by the ‘Dark Knight’ series in the 1980s.<sup>431</sup> Until today, despite being subtle or even ‘stealth’, camp remains an inseparable part of Batman’s characterisation, and, to a broader sphere beyond core comic readers, the Camp Crusader continues to be ‘the dominant image of Batman in the public imagination’.<sup>432</sup> As the colourful, whimsical, nothing-serious narrative becomes a signature visual reference to the deadly serious, hypermasculine Batman, the contrast between what Batman is supposed to embody and what Batman actually performs constantly inspires questions and reflections on his representation of normative masculinity.

### 5.2.1 Camp, and the Ambiguity of Gender Norms in ‘The Rainbow Batman’

Camp is commonly seen as both an element of radicalness and conservativeness. In Diana Green’s analysis of EC Comics, it is argued that the camp subversion in alien transgender bodies is achieved through a genuine confirmation of existing gender norms.<sup>433</sup> As for the camp iterations of Batman, it is also believed that ‘Batman’s overriding structure reinforces his “good Joe” normalcy, whilst its camp tone provides opportunities for him to both satirise patriarchal values and, at times, enact oppositional ones.’<sup>434</sup> Reflected in Batman’s whimsical stories and visuals that are commonly re-read as a symbol of the camp culture, camp not only presents a dual nature that mocks gender norms by solidification, but also allows possibilities to include unconventional gender expressions into normative performances.

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<sup>431</sup> Lou Anders, ‘Two of a Kind: Can the Team Behind Batman Begins Capture the Essence of the Joker?’, in *Batman Unauthorized: Vigilantes, Jokers, and Heroes in Gotham City*, ed. by Dennis O’Neil and Leah Wilson (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2008), pp. 17–34; Paul Levitz, ‘Man, Myth and the Cultural Icon’, in *Many More Lives of the Batman*, ed. by Roberta Pearson, William Uricchio, and Will Brooker (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), pp. 13–20, p. 17.

<sup>432</sup> Proctor, *Reboot Culture*, p. 196.

<sup>433</sup> Diana Green, ‘Horror Camp: Homoerotic Subtext in EC Comics’, in *Comic Books and the Cold War, 1946-1962: Essays on Graphic Treatment of Communism, the Code and Social Concerns*, ed. by Chris York and Rafiel York (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), pp. 146–53, p. 147.

<sup>434</sup> Carl Sweeney, *Adam West as a Signature Role TV Star* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2025), p. 25.

This section traces back to the 1950s and discusses ‘The Rainbow Batman’ in *Detective Comics* Vol 1 #241 (1957).<sup>435</sup> As previously introduced in Chapter Five’s introductory section, ‘The Rainbow Batman’ is arguably one of the first influential issues devoted to creating a camp image of Batman and remains relevant in his cultural history — even if the rainbow Batsuits outdate the actual use of rainbows in camp culture, the knowingly lightheartedness and subversiveness mark its relevance to camp culture. This issue is particularly significant for gaze analysis because it foregrounds to-be-looked-at-ness as the key topic, as evident both in its cover image (Graph 5.2.1) and in the storyline itself. On the cover page, Batman is dressed in a fuchsia pink suit, a striking and unusual choice compared to his classic 1950s palette of more subdued, stealth-oriented blue, grey, and yellow. The visual image and verbal texts are rendered with outrageous colouring, including a rainbow-coloured title, Batsuits and a television in saturated, conflicting colours, not to mention the flushed cheek and lips that match the redness of Batman’s outfit. The image itself tells a story: the television refers to media and publicity, the colour choices raise curiosity, and a confused Robin spells out the central cliffhanger of the issue: ‘Why?’ Combined, the text and image imply that the conflict of the storyline is built on viewing and attention seeking especially related to clothing and colours.

Resonating with the cover, #241 tells a story about the motive of being viewed with images that are intentionally made to be silly and campy. It leaves a small but sturdy moment in comic history as the first appearance of the ‘Rainbow Bat’, which is frequently referred back to as a contrast to the dark and gloomy Batman. In the storyline, Batman mysteriously appears in a series of brightly colored Batsuits, each a different hue, over several nights of crime-fighting, which culminates in a rainbow-patterned suit in his final confrontation with the antagonist. Unbeknownst to the public, he does this to divert attention from Robin, who has injured his arm during a rescue, thereby protecting his secret identity. This story arc is defined by a striking duality: on one hand, a male superhero challenges social expectations by deliberately wearing camp, flamboyant costumes and actively choosing to be an object of gaze; on the other, the motive of such an action is not specified as a challenge of gender norms, no matter how much it appears so to modern readers. Building on this contrast, the following discussion will examine how the narrative negotiates the tension between to-be-looked-at-ness and normative masculinity in this iteration of Batman.

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<sup>435</sup> Edmond Hamilton and others, ‘The Rainbow Batman’, *DC Comics*, *Detective Comics*, 1.241 (1957).

Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions

*8\_Graph 5.2.1 Cover of 'The Rainbow Bat', Detective Comics Vol 1 #241.*

#### **5.2.1.1 Form analysis**

Form 5.2.1-6 contains the last two panels out of the six panels on p. 6. In this extract, Batman, dressed in an unusual golden suit, was scolded by a female film star for stealing media attention from her.

Source: panels 5-6, p. 6, <i>Detective Comics</i> Vol 1 #241					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	<b>GOLD</b> -COLORED COSTUME THIS TIME! IT'S A DAZZLER!	Y	N	D
		NO WONDER EVERY-BODY'S WATCHING HIM INSTEAD OF MARION MARLEY!	Y	N	D
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	YOU--YOU WORE THAT COSTUME DELIBERATELY, SO EVERYONE WOULD LOOK AT YOU, NOT AT ME!	Y	N	D
		I'M SORRY, MISS MARLEY-- I DIDN'T MEAN TO SPOIL YOUR WELCOME!	N	N	D
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	D
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Small, regularly arranged rectangular panels with boxes and gutters.				
Narrative functions	Initial-Peak (Arc: an actress confronted Batman for stealing media attention.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	Y		A		N

Form 5.2.1-11 covers the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> panel from the total six panels on p. 11, illustrating Batman in camp rainbow suits performing usual vigilante work.

Source: panels 3-4, p. 11, <i>Detective Comics</i> Vol 1 #241					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	<i>AND FINALLY, <b>ROBIN'S</b> VIGILANCE PAYS OFF...</i>	N	A	N
		<i><b>BATMAN</b>, THERE'S ONE OF THEM! NO DOUBT ABOUT IT-- HE'S ONE OF THE THIEVES WHO STOLE THE CAMERA!</i>	N	N	N
		<i>HE DOESN'T HAVE THE CAMERA NOW, BUT I'LL GRAB HIM ANYHOW!</i>	N	N	N
	Multi	EXHIBITION	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<i>IN AN INSTANT, <b>BATMAN</b> BECOMES A RAINBOW OF DAZZLING ACTION...</i>	Y	A	N
		<i>WHATEVER YOU'VE GOT IN YOUR POCKET, PAL, THAT'S WHERE IT STAYS!</i>	N	N	N
		<i>I...<b>OOO!</b></i>	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N

Cross-panel Elements			
Spatial-topical parameters	Square panels divided with borders and gutters.		
Narrative functions	Establishment-Peak (Arc: Batman arrested the antagonist)		
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
	Y	N	N

37\_Form 5.2.1-11 Batman and Robin take down the antagonist, p. 11. Detective Comics Vol 1 #241.

### 5.2.1.2 To-be-looked-at-ness and expectations on gender performance

In this extract, both in-panel devices and the cross-panel narrative arc are either not indicative or discouraging readers from identifying with the protagonists. In Panel 1, Form 5.2.1-11, the composition of the image visually separates readers from the protagonist by positioning the visuals of supporting characters in front of Batman and Robin before the readers' viewing point. In addition, the larger crowds, in contrast to smaller protagonists, use relevant size differences between characters to create a perspective depth that moves the protagonists further away from the focal point. This third-person monstration, which encourages a detached observing experience, agrees with the stand-alone recitation in the verbal texts. As a typical Silver Age comic, 'The Rainbow Batman' is narrated by a verbal storyteller in the captions. Exemplified by the texts in square caption boxes in Forms 5.2.1-11, the narrator describes the visual content with information about contexts, backgrounds and pre-existing plots that can hardly be reflected in the images. By separating large parts of the plot between visuals and verbal texts, the narrative strategy distances readers from participatory engagement and instead encourages an alienated gaze on the protagonists. Thus, the protagonist does not perform as a fictional surrogate of the readers but becomes an object of their viewing.

Under such an alienating and objectifying gaze, Batman's bodily images are significantly coded with to-be-looked-at-ness that is beyond a typical spectacular presentation of a superhero. In the entire issue, the verbal captions repeatedly emphasise the reformative effect of changing Batsuits, for instance, 'all eyes focus not on the guest, but on **Batman**' and 'the "new" Batman'.<sup>436</sup> In the extracts, Batman's body, especially when he is dressed against

<sup>436</sup> Hamilton and others, 'The Rainbow Batman', pp. 4, 6.

normal expectations, is constantly prioritised as the visual centre of images. For example, Panel 2, Form 5.2.1-11 uses a central medium shot to capture Batman's striking move, which is an established compositional strategy for showcasing a superhero's physical prowess. However, the bold use of vibrant yellow and a full rainbow palette makes him blend with the eye-catching yellow background, radiating spectacle that almost irresistibly attracts the gaze. Similarly, gaze-guiding colour stylisation can also be identified in Panel 1, Form 5.2.1-11, where striking colours are used to highlight key characters in both scenes while the background characters are simply drawn with monotoned blue or grey, directing the readers' attention onto the protagonists while keeping them at a distance.

Being looked at, in this issue's context, is not irrelevant to gender performance, but also remains implicit in its subversion of hypermasculinity. Although the rainbow Batsuit predates the LGBTQ+ rainbow flag (1978) and was unlikely intended as a queer symbol at least in this issue's initial publication,<sup>437</sup> the comic itself portrays other characters reacting with surprise or disapproval, highlighting how unconventional Batman's colourful attire appears within the narrative. In Form 5.2.1-6, an actress became outraged for being outcompeted in appearance by Batman in a golden Batsuit. Her accusation, 'you — you wore that costume deliberately, so everyone would look at you, not at me', positions the male protagonist in the same spot as a female entertainer; in other words, someone expected to process to-be-looked-at-ness in both their gender and social roles. Batman's reaction to her dissatisfaction, on the other hand, does not assert his male gender identity, nor does he intend to struggle for a dominant power position. Illustrated by his apology and a submissive physical cue in Panel 2, Batman does not argue for the potential challenge to his masculinity, nor does he deny or justify the necessity of seeking viewing attention. The strong reactions and confusion from supporting characters reinforce the narrative that Batman's active choice of being flamboyant is against social expectations, and his to-be-looked-at-ness is coded as an unorthodox gender performance. Yet, it remains ambiguous whether the expectations he fails to meet in his colourful suits stem from norms regulating masculine behaviour or from the established image of him as a serious, dark vigilante, giving this story an interesting potential in its stance on gender norms.

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<sup>437</sup> We found no evidence that DC Comics straightforwardly links specifically the rainbow Batsuit to LGBTQ+ in published comics, such as *DC Pride 2021-25*. For the use of the rainbow flag as a symbol of LGBTQ+, see Nora Gonzales, 'How Did the Rainbow Flag Become a Symbol of LGBTQ Pride? | Britannica', Britannica, n.d.

### 5.2.2 Alienated Bodies and Homosociality in ‘The Kryll Way of Dying’

As for same-sex relationships, although the prevalence of homosociality is obvious in Batman narratives, the interactions between Batman and Superman, despite being no less significant in terms of Batman’s relationships, have received comparatively less scholarly attention. These two pillar characters have shared a long-term partnership since their first team-up issue, *Superman Vol 1 #76* (1952), where they discovered each other's secret identity when compelled to share a cruise room.<sup>438</sup> Since then, their vigilante teamwork continues in joint titles such as *World’s Finest Comics* (1941-1986), *Superman/Batman* (2003-2011), *Batman/Superman* (2013–2016, Rebirth: 2019–2021), and many more, not to mention the almost countless cooperative story arcs in individual issues. Among these publications, *World’s Finest Comics #289* (1983) provides an interesting example that specifies sexual aspects in the Batman and Superman dynamic while disambiguating explicit homosexuality. Titled ‘The Kryll Way of Dying’ (referred to as ‘Kryll’),<sup>439</sup> this issue explores the depth and intensity of the emotional connection between Batman and Superman with a layered narrative about the desire and pleasure in queer platonism. The story begins with Batman and Superman confessing their common struggles and strengthening their camaraderie in the Fortress of Solitude, Superman’s secret superhero base. Soon after, the Earth was invaded by the Kryll, worm-shaped alien beings feeding on human emotions. After a series of combats and fights, the protagonists’ mutual support inspired the alien invaders so much that they decided to give up on their mission, even if at the cost of sacrificing themselves. At the end of the story, the Kryll physically united with each other to realise a complete evolution in their lifeform and voluntarily disintegrated into sparkling dust. #289’s avoidance of direct sexual attraction between the protagonists aligns with Tipton’s observation on the counterforces of sexualisation and desexualisation in the ‘buddy’ narratives. However, in regard of the dilemma of degrading homosociality, it provides a

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<sup>438</sup> The story arc of this identity-revealing moment is modernised in *Superman/Batman Annual 1* (2006) with a teasing, humorous implication of homosocial closeness. For example, the two single beds in Batman and Superman’s shared room in *Superman #76* (pp. 3-4) are replaced by one shared bed in *Superman/Batman*’s retold version, along with one entire page of their ‘sleeping together’ moment and more light-hearted jokes about their potential intimacy. However, Annual 1’s heteronormative context almost certainly debunks the potential homoeroticism in Batman and Superman’s relationship. Out of consideration for radicalness, I chose *World’s Finest #289* over Annual 1, but it is worth pointing out that the comparison between the two versions could be an interesting inspiration for research on revisionism and queer(baiting) content in superhero narratives; Edmond Hamilton and others, ‘The Mightiest Team in the World’, *DC Comics*, *Superman*, 1.76 (1952); Joe Kelly, Ed McGuinness, and Carlo Barberi, ‘Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One...’, *DC Comics*, *Superman/Batman*, Annual 1.1 (2006).

<sup>439</sup> Doug Moench and others, ‘The Kryll Way of Dying’, *DC Comics*, *World’s Finest*, 1.289 (1983).

canonically queer resolution that engages with the Kryll's alienated bodies as a surrogate for homoerotic desire, which contributes to insisting on the ambiguity in a non-typical same-sex relationship.

### 5.2.2.1 Form analysis

The following analysis focuses on how vulnerability, peer support and same-sex intimacy are positively depicted as an extension of traditional masculinity, including two extracts respectively from the highlights of Batman and Superman discussing their feelings (pp. 9-10) and the Kryll abandoning their mission by sacrificing themselves (pp. 22-23).

The first set of extracts, including Forms 5.2.2-9 and 5.2.2-10, covers the first six panels on p. 9 and the third to seventh panels on p. 10.

Source: panels 1-6, p. 9, <i>World's Finest Comics</i> Vol 1 #289 (1983)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	SOMETIMES I THINK I'M... GOING <b>MAD</b> .  DO YOU KNOW HOW OFTEN I'VE BEEN TEMPTED TO ENLIST THE AID OF YOUR SUPER-POWERS IN LOCATING AND CRUSHING EVERY LAST POTENTIAL CRIMINAL PLAGUING GOTHAM--?	N	I	N
		--ALL IN ONE MAD NIGHT OF <b>VENGEANCE?</b>	N	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	N	N
Panel 2	Verbal	BUT YOU <b>HAVEN'T</b> TRIED ANYTHING SO IRRATIONAL. YOU'RE <b>NOT</b> MAD.	N	N	N
		NO...BUT I <b>AM</b> POSSESSED, AND TORMENTED BY IT ALL --	N	I	N

		AND EVERY TIME I FAIL TO <b>PREVENT</b> A TRAGEDY OF CRIME, AN ATROCITY OF GREED...			
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Panel 3	Verbal	...I FEEL LIKE EITHER GOING <b>BERSERK</b> OR SIMPLY BREAKING DOWN IN TEARS. MY GOD, SUPERMAN, IF YOU ONLY KNEW THE SENSE OF FRUSTRATION...	Y	I	N
		...THE SHEER, SHRIEKING <b>EMOTION</b> OF IT--!	N	I	D
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Panel 4	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 5	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 6	Verbal	<i>ONE MAN REACHES OUT, GENTLY, TO ANOTHER -- AND A WORLD OF PROFOUND EMPATHY PASSES FROM HIS</i>	Y	A	S

		<i>HAND... STRAIGHT TO THE BATMAN'S TROUBLED HEART.</i>			
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Panels 1-2 are larger square boxes; Panels 3-6 are small vertical rectangular boxes.				
Narrative functions	Initial-Release (Arc: Batman shared his feelings, and Superman comforted him.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	N		I		N

38\_Form 5.2.2-9 Superman provides emotional support to Batman, p. 9. *World's Finest Vol 1 #289*.

Source: panels 3-7, p. 10, <i>World's Finest Comics Vol 1 #289</i> (1983)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	BUT I...I CAN'T HELP FEELING THE LOSS OF MY <b>REAL</b> MOTHER AND FATHER...THE LOSS OF MY WHOLE <b>WORLD...</b>	N	I	N
		WHAT I'M GETTING AT IS THAT I'M... WELL, AN <b>ALIEN</b> HERE ON EARTH...AND I'M OFTEN ALONE, BATMAN, MORE ALONE THAN ANYONE CAN EVER KNOW.	N	I	N
	Multi	JOR-EL	N	N	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	AND I...I <b>TREASURE</b> THE CLOSE-NESS OF SOMEONE WHO HAS SHARED A SIMILAR LOSS...AND WHO IS FORCED TO DEAL WITH THE REALITY OF THAT LOSS...AS A PERSON WHOSE VERY BEING HAS BEEN <b>TRANSFORMED</b> BY IT.	N	I	D
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 3	Verbal	JUST AS YOU STRIVE TO ENSURE THAT <b>OTHERS</b> DO NOT SUFFER THE SAME FATE AS YOUR PARENTS... I REMAIN ON <b>CONSTANT VIGIL</b> TO PREVENT THE EARTH FROM GOING THE WAY OF KRYPTON.  WE'RE LIKE NIGHT AND DAY, YOU AND I, AND YET WE'RE <b>CLOSER</b> THAN WE REALIZE, CLOSER THAN TWINS, BECAUSE WE <b>COMPLEMENT</b> EACH OTHER.	N	I	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	I	N
Panel 4	Verbal	WE <b>FIT</b> EACH OTHER...	N	I	N

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Panel 5	Verbal	...LIKE HAND AND GLOVE.	Y	N	N
		<i>THEY HOLD <b>THE GRIP</b> FOR A LONG TIME...</i>	Y	A	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial- topical parameters	Rectangular panels divided by borders and gutters; growth in sizes from Panels 4-5.				
Narrative functions	Initial-Release (Arc: Superman shared his feelings, and Batman comforted him.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	N		I		N

39\_Form 5.2.2-10 Batman provides emotional support to Superman, p. 10. *World's Finest Vol 1 #289*.

In the second set, Form 5.2.2-22 includes the first four panels on p. 22, and Form 5.2.2-23 covers the last three panels on p. 23.

Source: panels 1-4, p. 22, <i>World's Finest Comics Vol 1 #289</i> (1983)					
In-panel Elements					
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation
Panel 1	Verbal	<i>UPON SENSING THEIR BRETHREN, THE SMALL SLUGS EFFORTLESSLY SNAP THE SPELL OF BRANIAC'S WEAPON.</i>	N	A	D

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 2	Verbal	<i>THEN BEGINS AN AWKWARD GROPING, A SMALLER QUEST-ING AT THE END OF THEIR OVERALL AND FAR LESS INTIMATE QUEST...</i>	Y	A	S
		<i>...TENTATIVE UNDULATIONS NOT UNLIKE A BIZARRE MATING RITUAL...</i>	Y	A	S
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	S
Panel 3	Verbal	<i>...FOLLOWED BY PHYSICAL LINKAGE, SYMBIOTIC MATING--</i>	Y	A	D
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	Y	A	S
Panel 4	Verbal	<i>--AND PSYCHIC SYNERGY.</i>	Y	A	D
		WE ARE NOW WHOLE AND LIKE OUR CREATORS, READY TO ATTAIN OUR OWN LEAP OF EVOLUTION...	Y	A	D

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions		Y	A	D
Cross-panel Elements						
Spatial-topical parameters	Rectangular panels divided by borders and gutters.					
Narrative functions	Establisher-Peak (Arc: the Kryll inserted each other.)					
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation	
	Y		N		N	

40\_Form 5.2.2-22 The Kryll unify, p. 22. *World's Finest Vol 1 #289*.

Source: panels 5-7, p. 23, <i>World's Finest Comics Vol 1 #289</i> (1983)						
In-panel Elements						
Serials	Modalities		Bodily spectacle	Identification	Sexualisation	
Panel 1	Verbal	THEY...THEY LIVED...	N	N	N	
		...ONLY TO DIE.	N	N	N	
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions		Y	I	N
Panel 2	Verbal-visual	<i>GLOWING WITH THE RETURNED AURAS OF EMOTION, THE TWO MEN WEEP... THEN TURN AND EMBRACE OVER THE ASHES OF FEELING, THE DUST OF SACRIFICE.</i>		Y	A	D
		<i>HERE IT IS WARM...</i>		N	I	D

	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Panel 3	Verbal	<i>OUTSIDE IT IS BITTERLY COLD.</i>	N	I	D
		<i>PERHAPS NO ONE ELSE, ON ANY WORLD, WOULD UNDERSTAND.</i>	N	A	D
		END	N	N	N
	Visual	Image has been removed due to Copyright restrictions	N	A	N
Cross-panel Elements					
Spatial-topical parameters	Panels 2-3 are evenly divided panels parallel to each other.				
Narrative functions	Release-prolongation (Arc: the Kryll sacrificed themselves.)				
Gaze relevance	Bodily spectacle		Identification		Sexualisation
	N		I		N

41\_Form 5.2.2-23 *Batman and Superman grieve over the Kryll's death, p. 23. World's Finest Vol 1 #289.*

### 5.2.2.2 Identifying gaze as an expression of support

In the first set of examples, when Batman and Superman share their feelings, the images tend to raise the reader's empathy with the speaker through mirroring identification, which is raised by an intimate gaze on the protagonists' exaggerated facial expressions. In Form 5.2.2-9, Panels 1, 3 and 4, which depict Batman confessing his dark impulse about violence and totalitarian crime control, are close-ups centralising the characters' facial expressions as the main gazed object. Batman's deeply troubled facial expressions are depicted with stylised distortions of eyebrows and eyes, making the psychological distress clearly visible even under the cape. Compared with the almost detached neutral faces in Section 4.1.1, the

vivid portraits of emotions humanise the protagonist and ground him as an approachable self-projection. Similarly, in Superman's round of confession, Panels 2-3 in Form 5.2.2-10 also feature close-ups that centralise Superman's sorrowful face as the key viewing object. Panel 3 is an extreme close-up in a composition that resembles Batman's confession in Panel 1, Form 5.2.2-9, only with a flip in directions. Although Superman's Panel 2 is not a close-up without a figurative background, it still promotes Superman as the primary viewing centre. The horizontal line in the middle of the image, which implies the turning line of two walls, suggests that the composition is achieved with a two-point perspective in which Superman, the largest visual representation in the panel, is the closest object to the focal point. In common with Batman's facial expressions, Superman's face in both panels is drawn with visual signifiers of pain and discomfort,<sup>440</sup> such as frowning eyebrows and a pulled mouth. Overlapping and explaining the visuals, verbal texts of these panels also do not shy away from openly sharing personal struggles and challenges, highlighting the weight of subjective feelings with self-descriptive language and emphasised key words: the word '*emotion*' is bolded and italicised as emphasis in Panel 3, Form 5.2.2-9. In the same panel, Batman actively exposes his vulnerability to Superman, admitting his frustration with strong expressions such as '*berserk*' and 'breaking down in tears'. With such relatable emphasis on the visibility of emotions, Batman and Superman's discussions of negative feelings invoke the readers' mirroring with similarities in experience and appeal to empathetic identification.

Additionally, the background choices of these two pages are highly subjective, maintaining a consistent effort to appeal to readers' empathetic engagement. Before the extracts, p. 8 contextualises the environment of their talk as the Fortress of Solitude, which is supposed to be a place full of 'vast wonders' as canonically Superman's personal sanctuary in the Arctic, as explained in the verbal description.<sup>441</sup> However, the figurative presentation of such a surreal and spectacular location is limited to only a few Orienter and Prolongation panels, such as Panel 1 Form 5.2.2-10, rather than being used to embellish the Peak moment of Batman and Superman's bonding. During the two arcs, there are mainly three types of subjective backgrounds. Firstly, the most frequently applied type is plain colouring or simple abstract shapes that mainly reflect the characters' feelings. For example, in Form 5.2.2-9, when Batman exposed strong negative feelings by admitting that he was 'going *mad*' and was tempted to commit a massacre, the background turns from a realistic representation of

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<sup>440</sup> McCloud, *Making Comics*, pp. 80-86.

<sup>441</sup> Moench, and others, 'The Kryll Way of Dying', p. 8.

the Fortress to an intense red that signifies rage and danger to match the darkness in his verbal lines. In addition, the shadows drawn with crossed lines gradually fade from the top of the image, symbolising that the central character is troubled in his mind. In Panel 4, the same device reappears to amplify the character's body language, helping the visual to deliver a sense of unsettlement in the silence of lacking verbal texts. Other abstract symbolisation includes a yellow oval for intensity (Panel 3, Form 5.2.2-9), focus lines for emphasising (Panel 5, Form 5.2.2-10), concentric circles with yellow-red hue variation for highlighting and enlightening (Panel 6, Form 5.2.2-10), to name a few. The abstract backgrounds give the visuals more freedom in reflecting psychologically what is supposed to be felt from the story, avoiding the restriction of a non-sensual presentation of logically what items should be seen.

The Last two panels in Form 5.2.2-23 also exemplify emotional relevance in visual representations of the protagonists. The colouring of these two juxtaposed panels has contrasting colour temperatures, matching the Release of the Kryll's sacrifice with a warm colour palette and its Prolongation with a cold tone. In Panel 3, the choice of white, yellow, orange and pink accurately repeats 'auras' in the verbal text with these colours' light luminance. More importantly, this colour set visualises the description of 'warm' in the verbal text, with a chromatic combination of warm colours that implies positivity and warmth. To create a contrasting pair, Panel 4 uses the cold colour family, including green, blue and purple, to reflect 'bitterly cold' in the verbal text. The comforting companionship between the two characters inside the Fortress is sharply contrasted with the harsh loneliness outside, visually capturing the psychological experience of bittersweet emotion.

The focus on emotional tenderness depicted in Batman and Superman's homosocial relationship challenges and expands the conventions of stereotypical masculine friendship: they can actively show vulnerability, build intimate and affectionate bonding, and provide moral support for each other. In this narrative, the trait of emotional capability is effortlessly endowed to two masculine-presented men as a part of their role-model influence without referring to the patriarchal structure of rejecting social norms of femininity, nor by affirming a hegemonic alliance over women. Rather, the homosocial coding in their relationship is achieved by the exclusive division of 'us' in private and the rest of the world. Brooker notices that, compared to other hero/sidekick character arrangements, what makes Batman and Robin's relationship uniquely homosocial is that their closeness extends beyond the

professional domain and enters a more personal, domestic sphere,<sup>442</sup> which also fits the pattern of Batman and Superman's bond in 'Kryll'. By establishing a comparison between inside and outside, warmth and coldness, Batman and Superman's relationship extends beyond a performative presentation in a public realm between professional peers and enters a private domain. In this sense, 'Kryll' revises the notion of manhood in both connotation and method.

Another type of identification is evoked more directly with the merger between the focal point and the character's first-person viewing perspective. In Form 5.2.2-9, the close-up of Batman's face in Panel 1 is juxtaposed with Superman straightforwardly staring into the assumed position of the focal point in Panel 2, suggesting an exchange of first-person monstrating roles. Playing the role of viewing Batman as an empathetic alter ego and switching to the receiver of Superman's supportive gaze strikingly creates a sense of safety when being seen in a non-judgmental manner. Similarly, Panels 4-5 use symmetrical compositions and roughly parallel panel shapes to create an exchange between the characters. The close-ups, with nothing else in verbal texts but each other at the receiving end of the gaze, imply that readers alternatively experience the characters' perspective. Form 5.2.2-10 also uses consecutive panels to achieve first-person monstration, as Batman's gaze at Superman in Panel 2 is linked to the focus on Superman's face in Panel 3. The visuals in these two Forms are not simply how readers see them from a perspective of someone outside of Batman and Superman's relationship. Rather, the emotional, vulnerable close-ups of the confessor and the supportive gaze from the listener also reflect how Batman and Superman see each other, creating two roughly parallel narrative structures to imply common experiences and mutual understanding.

The similarity between Batman and Superman, as Brown observes, is written as one of the most important keystones for their friendship and partnership.<sup>443</sup> In 'Kryll', building a continuous track of an independent observer contributes to the validation of the protagonists' sameness and thus closeness. During both characters' confessions, the vague presence of the focal point is constantly engaged with Batman and Superman's interactions at an equal position. For example, in Panels 4-5, Form 5.2.2-9, the characters directly address each other without interruptions, as the context of Superman's secret hideout has established an isolated

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<sup>442</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, pp. 134-36.

<sup>443</sup> Brown, *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity*, pp. 157-185.

situation; but both characters' three-quarter portraits direct the relative standing positions in a V-shape and open the space to include the focal point in the range of their intimacy. In Panel 3, although both characters are shown in the visual, the over-shoulder shot of Superman suggests a physically close distance and an alignment between the readers and Superman. Form 5.2.2-10 also includes such an indication of open-ended intimacy, as the close distance and the double gaze from both the readers and Batman in Panel 2 creates a sense of participating in Batman and Superman's private conversation within a close social range. Under such an actively engaged gaze, the visuals, on the one hand, explicitly establish a balanced dynamic between Batman and Superman. On the other hand, the implication of readers' participation creates an undertone of a triangular relationship among the two fictional characters and the spectator, which allows readers to not only see their commonly shared characteristics, but also experience their compatibility.

When the arcs develop to the point where Batman and Superman finish sharing individual experience and reach mutual understanding and support, the readers are alienated from the characters as more detached observers to witness their interdependence in complementary roles. Panel 6 in Form 5.2.2-9, which is the Release of Batman's confession, turns to a medium shot after a series of close-ups, implying a withdrawal from previously established strong identification. The verbal text in the yellow box uses descriptive yet effective language, such as *'reaches out, gently'*, *'a world of profound empathy passes [...] straight to the Batman's troubled heart'*, to extend the movement with the static gesture of Superman placing a reassuring hand on Batman's shoulder. The information in the narrative box expands both the time duration and the characters' subjective feelings beyond the limitations of an image of two men standing together, which establishes a recitator to directly communicate with the readers. By distancing readers from the intimate interaction within this pair, the readers' gaze from a faraway focal point pauses the sense of participation and affirms an exclusive boundary in their partnership. The same observant role also appears in the Peak of the Form 5.2.2-10 in Panels 4-5, where the medium shot in Panel 4 visually interrupts the previously established identification. Panel 5 prolongs the moment of sharing support with a close-up on holding hands in symmetrical composition and a flat viewing angle, suggesting a balanced attention on both characters, which is prolonged by the verbal description *'for a long time'* to allow a closer observation. The readers' gaze gradually develops from playing both roles in Batman and Superman's relationship, which establishes an assuring context to share negative emotions. Then, a more alienated gaze is used to validate the profound bonding between the male heroes as a confirmation of the strength of

peer support. Distributed into different perspectives, gazing creates a unique safe space that encourages tenderness, sensitivity and love.

### 5.2.2.3 *Alienated bodies as a release of homoerotic tension*

Despite the strong emotional bond, Batman and Superman's interactions do not show a strong reliance on bodily presentation and physical contact. Rather, the aim of gazing is to deliver senses and emotions with detailed depictions of facial expressions. Apart from the previously discussed effect of individual close-ups, the transitioning among panels is also arranged to amplify the emotional weight in the characters' portraits. For example, Form 5.2.2-10's visuals have a gradual accumulation of psychological depth, panning in from the distant focal points of an extreme far-shot of the Fortress of Solitude in Panel 1 to a close examination of Superman's face in Panel 3. Panel 1's image presents a dramatic contrast between the protagonists' small, animated forms and the monumental, lifeless statues of Superman's deceased parents (as the graphic text 'Jor-El' suggests) which is further emphasised by the composition with a three-point perspective that enlarges the graphic depth, and thus, the spatial weight of the statues. The gigantic presence of Superman's parents' memorials, representing an irredeemable loss and a reminder of his solitude as the last survivor of his planet and an alien being on Earth, dwarfs the two protagonists with an ambience of grief and loneliness repressed by the solemn environment. When the composition evolves to closer views in the following two panels, Superman's longing for interpersonal connection is expressed both in his troubled facial expression and his verbal words about '*treasur*[ing] the closeness of someone who has shared a similar loss', delivering a more humane depiction of the protagonist's feelings by releasing the emotional tension in panel 1.

Although the relationship between the male protagonists is not specified with a sexual nature, the homoerotic desire is channelled through the alien bodies that do not conform to gender norms. In both arcs about Batman and Superman's respective confessions of feelings, the two Releases conclude the explosion of their emotions with physical contact that can hardly be interpreted as romantic (such as 'grip' in Form 5.2.2-10). Superman does interpret the compatibility of Batman and him as a simile of hand and glove in Panels 5-6, Form 5.2.2-10. Metaphorically, the imagery of inserting and intaking could be read as an implication of sexual tension, but considering the image of the glove and hands in Panel 6, Superman's comparison could also be merely a repetition of the visual as an emphasis. Moreover, when describing their feelings for each other, the comic script chooses a desexualised expression

‘brethren’ (Panel 1, Form 5.2.2-22) to emphasise the intensity of Batman and Superman’s spiritual bond but avoid the possible homosexual connotation.

On the other hand, the sexual similes and metaphors embodied in the alien physicality in Form 5.2.2-23 resolve the contradiction between the referential homosexuality and the desexualised narrative. In Panels 1-4, the Kryll physically connect by fully enveloping the other — one Kryll’s body sliding into a cavity of another, forming a seamless, sheath-like union. The verbal texts do not shy away from the sexual intimacy in the Kryll’s newly developed relationships with explicit expressions describing sexual activities, such as ‘a bizarre mating ritual’ and ‘symbiotic mating’. The visuals are even more explicit about the reference to sexual intercourse, using three consecutive panels (2-4) to depict the process of penetration as an explication of ‘mating’ in the verbal text. Pulling the focal point in the far shot in Panel 2 closer to the aliens, the close-ups of one worm-like creature penetrating another in Panels 3-4 evoke the gaze on the bodies without a humanoid appearance. Departing from anthropocentric norms, such a bodily presentation does not conform to the gender norms commonly recognisable in human standards, resolving the notion of sexuality in sexual behaviours. The similarity in the participants’ physical appearance potentially implies homosexuality, but the non-humanoid shapes, which means a lack of clear representation of sexual organs, gives the intercourse scene more ambiguity in its alienness. Moreover, in verbal narrative, the Peak of this alien mating arc concludes the erotic tension as ‘psychic synergy’ and the union as a ‘whole’, resonating the sensual closeness of the alien’s bonding with Batman and Superman’s desexualised male bonding. In addition, the sleeve-like bodily structure of Kryll accurately recreates Superman’s vision of intimacy in a hand-and-glove relationship. The duality of sexualisation and alienness breaks the gender norms in superheroes’ performance of gender roles in their interactions, giving the issue a potential for queer reading that expands the interpretation of heteronormative masculinity presented in same-sex intimacy.

#### *5.2.2.4 Evaluation*

In ‘Kryll’, parallel visuals are used to illustrate the similarities between the two male superheroes as a validation of their closeness. The potential of their homosexual intimacy is repressed by limiting their physical contact in social interactions and choosing non-sexual expressions to describe their relationships. However, promoting same-sex intimacy and vulnerability of men with both the plot design and visual presentations enriches Batman and Superman’s character image as exemplars of masculine identity. Furthermore, by

introducing alienated bodies to bear the sexualising gaze as an illustration of the impact of Batman and Superman's bonding, the story expands masculinity with queer eroticism that provides a resolution of preserving the nature of ambiguity in homosociality.

### 5.3 Concluding remarks

This chapter focuses on the reversive potential of Batman stories, exploring how such a classic, iconic, archetypal superhero also does not lack alternative and reformative possibilities in his cultural legacy. The topics of this chapter revolve around the elements that are commonly believed to be 'threats' of normative masculinity and heteronormativity. By examining these themes, it is argued that, even if Batman comics in general take a stance of mainstream gender and sexuality representation, they also have subtly rewritten the seemingly self-evident connection of the superhero genre and masculinity and enriched the connotation of masculinity with camp and homosocial elements.

The first group of case-studies discusses the material destruction of the superhero bodies, including the themes of ageing and death, which are logically inevitable but tend to be carefully avoided in conventional superhero narratives. Returning to DKR, the first case examines its radical challenge to the link between strength, vitality, and heroic legitimacy, questioning whether masculinity is a naturally desirable aspect of superhero identity. Masculinities, represented by the ageing superhero and the grotesque villain respectively, are disqualified from being ideal gender features, as the readers' identifying gaze with the protagonist reveals his demasculinised performance and the antagonist's hypermasculine monstrosity. Next, *Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader* (2009) further disassociates the hypermasculine drive in Batman's origin stories, using an identifying narrative to contrast between social perceptions of masculine performance and individuals' personal experience, appeal to readers' empathy, and eventually recast the hero's motivation in more humanised, less gendered terms. Compared to the previously discussed cases where Batman's dominance is challenged, these cases show more fundamental reflections and revisions on the relationship between superhero stories and masculine norms. Their narratives are not limited to how the protagonist's masculinity is challenged and outcompeted by entities of even higher power positions; rather, they encourage readers to question the necessity of prioritising masculinity, and, more importantly, whether essentialist masculinity exists at all.

Finally, the last section explores camp and queerness in a heteronormative context, illustrating that Batman, as a mainstream masculine figure, can enrich traditional gender norms through unconventional gender performances. As early as 1957, 'The Rainbow Batman' supports the validity of to-be-looked-at-ness in men's appearance, obfuscating the source of conflict between camp visuality and hegemonic social norms. In the second case, the emotionally charged partnership between Batman and Superman in 'The Kryll Way of Dying' (1983) illustrates how same-sex intimacy, even when coded through alien surrogates, unsettles rigid heteromasculine norms by weaving queer affect into the fabric of superhero homosociality. These diverse iterations illustrate that Batman is not simply a monument to dominant masculinity, but also a site where masculinity is questioned, destabilised, and reformed. In each case, masculinity is prised loose from its presumed universality, revealing both its limits and its capacity for reconfiguration. In doing so, these narratives transform Batman into a cultural arena where superheroism no longer depends on a stable masculine ideal but instead becomes a stage for renegotiating gendered identity itself.

## Conclusion

This research is a panel-by-panel textual analysis conducted with analytical forms and discussions, which breaks down the modalities in superhero comics and examines the presentation of male bodies and the manipulation of normative masculinity. The study focuses on periodical Batman comics from DC Comics. As a long-standing cultural construct spanning multiple media and historical periods, Batman consolidates diverse notions of men and manliness into a widely recognisable figure. These constructions, though sometimes overlapping or contradictory, are accessible to contemporary readers as a coherent cultural image. By examining examples from across Batman's 86-year publication history, the study identifies narrative strategies related to body build, physical capabilities, dominance, and social affirmation as performances of normative masculinity. It also considers themes such as violence, ageing, death, gender roles, and queer sexuality as points where these norms may be challenged or revised, highlighting how male bodies in superhero narratives function as sites of fluid power struggles. This research contributes to gaze studies by framing male bodies as the objects of a sexualising gaze in a context broader than the categories of homosexuality and female desire within heterosexual frameworks, exploring the potential of homosociality in the visual culture. It also proposes a new methodological model for analysing gaze in comics, which bridges the analysis of meaning-making devices with their implications for power relations, offering a text-based approach to examining the components of gaze. This framework can potentially be applied to the study of other superhero comics, including those published by different companies, provided that differences in publishing contexts are acknowledged and taken into account in the evaluation of the cases.

Chapter One is a literature review that outlines current research on gender and sexuality in superhero narratives, with a special focus on performance, gender norms and gendered features. Section 1.1 reviews the current studies about male bodies in superhero comics, pointing out that although superheroes' bodily presentations are gendered and exaggerated to convey identities, their potential in gender features is not fully explored. Section 1.2 synthesises the gender study publications, noticing that superhero masculinity is more frequently studied when it challenges existing norms. Section 1.3 traces the origins of gender debates in this genre, reviewing *Seduction of the Innocent* and relevant controversies and highlights Batman as a key figure of gender debates when his performance challenges masculine conventions. By comparing current studies of superhero bodies and masculinity,

this section points out a notable gap in research concerning normative masculinity and the positioning of male bodies as spectated objects.

Chapter Two develops a theoretical framework for text-based gaze analysis. Section 2.1 begins with a synthesis and discussion of current research on gendered gaze in superhero narratives, confirming the applicability of Laura Mulvey's gaze theory while addressing its limitations in categorising gazes based on strictly divided readerships. Building on this finding, Section 2.2 develops a research framework for the textual analysis of gazes. Firstly, it elaborates on the overall research design, which uses a comprehensive comic reading to determine the presence and types of gazes. By discussing the gazes' implication of the power positions between the spectator and objects, such analysis examines whether the superhero's performance of masculinity challenges or reinforces existing norms. Then, Section 2.2.1 introduces a series of tools for interpreting the purpose of a comic's presentation, including art techniques, multimodality theories, visual language grammar and visual narratology for elements both within and across panels. Next, Section 2.2.2 contextualises Batman comics as the case examples, discussing the scope of materials and the rationale for such choices. Finally, Section 2.2.3 introduces a necessary guiding tool for the analysis, which is an analytical form that divides the comic texts into three aspects based on Mulvey's description of gaze: whether a body is verbally, visually or narratively presented to induce gaze, whether such a presentation intentionally calls for readers' empathy or identification, and whether it is relevant to sexualisation.

Chapters Three to Five are case-studies of comic pieces selected from DC Comics' periodicals and graphic novels of the Batman franchise. Chapter Three consists of five case-studies to explore the mechanism of constructing a representative image of masculinity and the manipulation of power distance to reinforce such a concept. The first two cases intend to confirm the power dynamics in gazing, exploring how invisibility, under gaze-inducing devices, reinforces the power of the spectated object. With examples from *the Halloween Special of Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight* and 'Ten Nights of the Beast' in *Batman Vol 1 #420*, Section 3.1 discusses the control of visibility as an enforcement of power and its relevance in stabilising hegemonic masculinity. The next three cases in Section 3.2, respectively selected from the graphic novel edition of *Batman: Hush*, *Batman Vol 1 #60* 'Crime Through the Ages!' and DKR, provide an overview of the three most frequently discussed bodily aspects in superhero narratives, namely essentialist physiques, physical capacities, and somatic experience, with examples about body spectacles, humours and

superhero origins. Archiving over the Golden Age to the present day, these examples illustrate that mainstream iterations of Batman establish his identity as a model of a masculine man by using gazes to validate idealised body images, ultrahuman prowess, and, very interestingly, traumatic experiences.

Chapter Four focuses on more controversial visual and narrative devices in comic history, including violence and nudity, to address their double potential of strengthening or threatening a character's performance of manliness. Both themes have two contrasting examples: for violent scenes, *Batman* Vol 1 #29 'Enemy No. 1' exemplifies the effect of stylised violence in elevating a pain-related association and emphasising resilience as a characteristic of masculinity. In comparison, *Batman* Vol 1 # 497 'The Broken Bat' illustrates the viewing pleasure of explicit brutality and its erosion of the victim's manhood. In the following section, the differences between active presentation and passive exposure of nudity are discussed with examples from *Detective Comics* Vol 1 #471 and the miniseries of *Batman: Damned*. In the former example, gazing at the revealed body confirms its strength as an embodiment of the superhero identity. In the latter case, gazing becomes a device of invading the gazed character's privacy, which objectifies him as a voyeuristic target in a weaker power position. These examples illustrate how visual and narrative elements can significantly reshape the meaning of the gaze, even if the objects of that gaze evolve within a shared theme. As a result, the performance of masculine traits is shown to be fluid and context dependent.

Chapter Five moves on to the deconstruction and reinterpretation of masculinity, intending to discuss the examples that shake the preset assumption in the superhero genre that masculinity is self-evidently desirable and narrowly defined. Section 5.2 explores ageing and death — two themes that fundamentally challenge the legitimacy and stability of superhero identities. The first case returns to DKR, exploring the duality of monstrosity and emasculation in ageing bodies. Next, 'Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader? Part 2' in *Detective Comics* Vol 1 # 853 provides a conclusive remark on the accumulated cultural images of Batman as both a character and a collective notion that has absorbed various connotations of masculine superheroism in history. By visualising first-person near-death experience, this case reinterprets Batman's heroic achievement as a compulsory response to trauma and a remembrance of parental love as a child, dissociating death and adult manliness from heroism. Finally, the last section develops on the current research on sexuality and gender features, providing examples of camp and homosociality that challenge the

conventions of heteronormative masculinity. *Detective Comics* Vol. 1 #241, ‘The Rainbow Batman’, highlights the tension between subversive nonconformity and the reinforcement of normative authority, which is channelled through the camp portrayal of alternative masculinity. Finally, the case of *World’s Finest Comics* #289 reveals the queer nature of Batman and Superman’s homosocial partnership, discussing how the gaze on humanoid male bodies and alien bodies segments the desire in viewing into sexual/non-sexual. This division maintains the vagueness of the protagonists’ relationship and expands the boundaries of masculinity. By examining examples dating back to the 1950s, this chapter’s cases challenge the superiority of stereotypical masculinity in individuals and in relationships, arguing that camp and queerness have always been a part of Batman’s cultural legacy and an aspect of his gender performance. Also, by exploring the revision and re-contextualisation of normative masculinity, it is argued that hypermasculinity in superheroes is not always presented as a desirable or inseparable element in their identities.

To conclude, this research examines Batman’s character image in the narrative context of comics, arguing that, as masculine ideals, superheroes do not exemplify a unified set of gender norms. Instead, they reflect the mainstream expectation of a male figure as well as the transcendental aspiration that breaks or expands existing norms. By exploring visual, verbal and narrative devices in comics, this research identifies the gaze on male superhero bodies and discusses the drives in such pleasurable viewing, contributing to the research on masculinities in popular culture and the exploration of sexualising gazes on men in gaze studies. It seeks to broaden the study of gender and visibility by turning attention to normative masculinity — an object often regarded as dominant and therefore excluded from discussions of viewing pleasure. This research positions Batman as an ahistorical cultural product, aiming to encourage future explorations of the diverse forms of masculinity in superhero narratives, particularly within specific eras or socio-historical contexts.

With detailed case analysis, this research distinguishes gaze-inducing elements in source comics and their relevance to power dynamics among readers and characters, which leads to the analysis of male bodily images’ impact on the perception of masculinity. The research questions mainly concern three aspects: what elements in comics can encourage gaze, what types of visual pleasure they induce, and how such viewing shapes representations of masculinity. Specifically addressing these research questions, first, it is found that the control of visibility under gaze manifests power, which is achieved through multimodal guidance — such as compositions in visuals, emphatic tone in verbal texts, and narrative climax in the

narrative structure — that highlights bodily images and induces gaze. The gazes on male bodies tend to be a complex of both scopophilia and narcissistic pleasure, which is loaded with a mixture of libidinal and self-releasing desires in the manipulation of identifiable or alienating readings. In this way, masculine ideals are reinforced and expanded when the superheroes take a dominant power position despite being the gazed objects, and the legitimacy of such ideals is contested or even overruled when the spectators occupy a higher position. Thus, superhero narratives are not merely superficial reflections of patriarchal dominance, but have always held the potential for evolution and progressive reimagining.

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# Appendix 1 Publication Timeline of Selected Cases

## **The Golden Age (1938-1955)**

1945 *Batman* Vol 1 #29, 'Enemy No. 1'

1950 *Batman* Vol 1 #60, 'Crime Through the Ages!'

## **The Silver Age (1956-1971)**

1957 *Detective Comics* Vol 1 #241, 'The Rainbow Batman'

## **The Bronze Age (1971-1985)**

1977 *Detective Comics* Vol 1 #471, 'The Dead Yet Live'

1983 *World's Finest Comics* Vol 1 #289, 'The Kryll Way of Dying'

## **The Modern Age (1985-present)**

### Post-Crisis era (1985-2011)

1986 *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* #1-4

1988 *Batman* Vol 1 #420, 'Ten Nights of the Beast - Part 4'

1993 *Batman* Vol 1 #497, 'The Broken Bat'

1997 *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight: Halloween Special* #1, 'Choices'

2009 *Detective Comics* Vol 1 #853 'Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader? (Part 2)'

### New 52 (2011-2016)

### DC Universe onwards (2017-present)

2017 *Batman: Hush 15th Anniversary Edition*, 'Who He is and How He Came to Be'

2018 *Batman: Damned* Vol 1 #1, 'Book One'

## Appendix 2 Full Pages of Selected Cases

Case 3.1.1 'Choices'

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Case 3.1.2 'Ten Nights of the Beast

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Case 3.2.1 *Batman: Hush*

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Case 3.2.2 'Crime Through the Ages!'

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Case 3.2.3 *The Dark Knight Returns*

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Case 4.1.1 'Enemy No. 1'

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Case 4.1.2 'The Broken Bat'

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### Case 4.2.1 The Dead Yet Live'

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Case 4.2.2 *Batman: Damned*

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Case 5.1.1 *The Dark Knight Returns*

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### Case 5.1.2 'Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader'

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### Case 5.2.1 'The Rainbow Batman'

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Case 5.2.2 'The Kryll Way of Dying'

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