

Art: An Essay

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: DOCTOR STRANGE.....	2
STAN LEE'S MARVEL COMICS GROUP.....	10
THE ART AND ARTISTRY OF COMICS.....	17
THE PLOTTING AND STORY OF COMICS.....	30

Table of Illustrations

Figure 1 <i>The Illustrations of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko</i>	3
Figure 2 <i>The Silver Age of Comics</i>	4
Figure 3 <i>The Art of the Beano British comic</i>	5
Figure 4 <i>The Art and Imagination of Marie Severin</i>	7
Figure 5 <i>The Many Spells of Dr Strange</i>	9
Figure 6 <i>Dormammu's Dread Domain, by various</i>	11
Figure 7 <i>The Many Worlds of Dr Strange</i>	14
Figure 8 <i>Lois Lane #63</i>	16
Figure 9 <i>The Silver Age</i>	18
Figure 10 <i>Ben Grimm's rebellion, by Buscema</i>	21
Figure 11 <i>Great Art Beyond the Silver Age</i>	23
Figure 12 <i>Not-so-good Art</i>	25
Figure 13 <i>Multi-panel Story-telling in Comics Art</i>	28
Figure 14 <i>The Hulk</i>	36
Figure 15 <i>Fantagraphics and Dark Horse (Non-Marvel) Comics Publishers</i>	39

INTRODUCTION: DOCTOR STRANGE

One of the best-realised characters created by Marvel Comics in its earliest days was a magician named Dr Strange - 'Master of the Mystic Arts'.

Stephen Strange is a top-flight surgeon who is unlucky enough to suffer a car accident. Despite making a full recovery in all other respects, Strange suffers nerve damage to his hands. The upshot is that he can no longer work performing delicate surgery. He wanders the world seeking a cure and ends up in a mysterious location in Tibet. Studying under a wise old mystic known only as 'the Ancient One', Stephen Strange is initiated into a parallel world of magic and sorcery and the mystic arts, as Dr Strange.

Dr Strange debuted in *Strange Tales* in July 1963; a year after the Gamma rays from a radiation accident had first turned Dr Banner into the monstrous Hulk, in May 1962. In the early sixties, Marvel was just on the cusp of developing the astonishing continuing stories that would evolve the comics medium into high literature not seen before, in the many publishers of comics across the world.

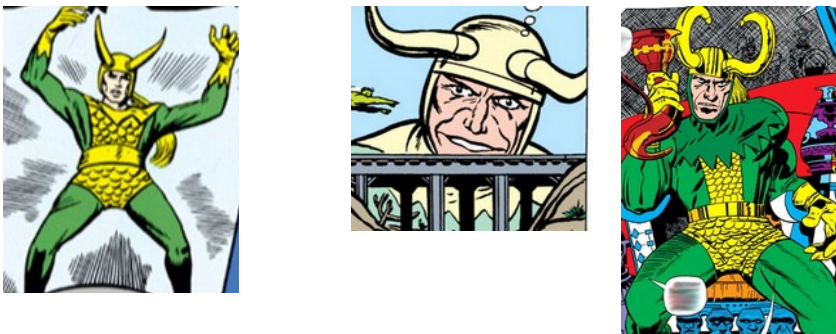
In the previous decade, monsters and mysteries had been a staple of the *Strange Tales* comics throughout the fifties. The escape-seeking youth of the day willing to suspend belief through science fiction could receive the visual delights of a monster story featuring, say, giant Ants; menacing beautiful women until being seen off by square-jawed 'ordinary heroes'.

A mystery would use outright fantasy more often than science, such as shops that appeared from the mist to change your luck, apparently for the better only to be revealed later as carrying a sting. Steve Ditko's moody, curvy style was as strong a match for telling these one-off morality tales as Jack Kirby's powerful and highly visual style was well suited to the drawing of 'Rok – the beast

from below!', for example. But alongside the revolution in writing that was brewing, there was also a revolution in art coming, backed up by the changes in technology familiar to us from desktop publishing.

Where Kirby and Ditko – the old school - were artists largely of line, Gene Colan and Marie Severin were artists of light and shade. The competition would inspire the old school to reach new heights, but the differences would remain. Just as Kirby's decade of drawing Loki, the Norse God of Evil, would never quite reach realism, so Ditko's drawing of Dr Strange would evolve from a clichéd slant-eyed, moustached Easterner but would never quite transcend the archetypal athletic, handsome American – Errol Flynn, but with the vulnerability of that kiss-curl escaping down his forehead.

Figure 1 *The Illustrations of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko*



A consistent but evolving visualisation of Loki from early to mid-period Jack Kirby



From first appearance to maturity for Ditko's Dr Strange.

Against the – frankly, homo-erotic - sheer gorgeousness of Colan's work on 'Iron Man' in the mid-sixties, Ditko's organic, moody pencils could almost appear cartoonish. Yet, the battle of the artworks was not so easily settled. For me, Colan's illustrations when he moved on to the Dr Strange solo magazine in the late sixties are muddy and unsatisfying, opaque more than mysterious. Ditko and Kirby both had something that would give them the true comic-fans' undying affection: from their long years of hard work in the fifties, they were masters of story-telling. At its best, it is the same skill the director brings to the feature film; the choice of which scenes to show and which to omit; of where the viewpoint should be; and of focus and focal-length.

Figure 2 *The Silver Age of Comics.*



Great stories were also the opportunity for great story-telling. In the same way that John Ford or Howard Hawks can teach the multi-scripted, focus-grouped, techno-budgeted blockbuster of today all it needs to know about film, Kirby and Ditko fed, not the 'modern' art of cubism or post-modernism but something incalculably greater and immeasurably more valuable: the imagination, itself.

This is important because, although progression in art and technology would be steady over the next thirty to fifty years, the revolution in writing that was about to occur would ultimately peak, and inevitably decline, all within a single decade. By the early seventies Neal Adams moody, adult work on Batman was recognisably from the same moral Universe as the best of the Marvel work under Stan Lee, but it was also the final peak before a steady decline into lowlands: the beginning of the so-named Bronze Age, starting around 1973.

The genius of Marvel in the Sixties was naturally contagious to their great rival, DC. More like an explosion than a revolution, it could not be contained, but it could not be controlled. It would not be repeated until, in my view, the years of Frank Miller in the 1990s; in some others' view, Gaiman and McKean's Sandman also in the 1990s (the last artwork to have me gasp out loud). I guess that is the story I am trying to tell here.

I was born in 1960. The fifties were long gone and, by the time I was old enough to appreciate comics at the age of nine or so, the explosion of Marvel's genius would just be beginning to shade into repetition.

Nor were American comics available to me at the age of nine. It wasn't until my late teen years that some newsagents reasonably near to me would stock comics. In London, where I visited my grandmothers in these years, there were 2nd hand bookshops where a few 2nd-hand - now priceless

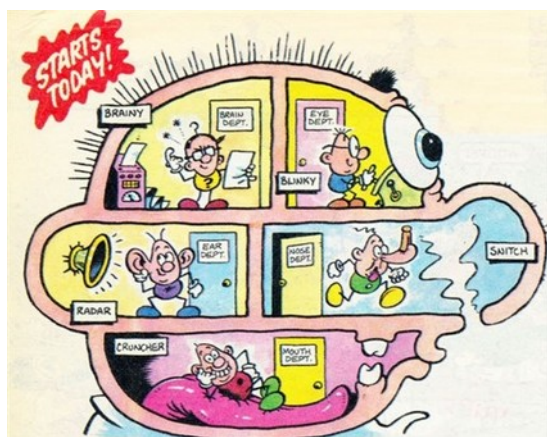
- full-colour originals could be had for a few pence of pocket money. For years I would read the yellowing adverts in the pages between stories offering second-hand comics to American domestic customers. 100,000 comics, they would boast. And I would dream of having access to such a source.

As with other British children, my imagination was straitjacketed by the products of D C Thomson, virtually the monopoly British comics company, producing weekly black and white issues, whose flagship title was the Beano. As we approached pubescence we'd be fed the Hotspur (for boys) or Bunty (for girls). I read both – I even bought Bunty from the newsagents, which earned me a few second looks! But these were a far, far cry from 'Fireball XL5' on the TV, and the coming 'Captain Scarlett', 'Thunderbirds' and, best of all, 'Dr Who'.

My elder brothers had had the opportunity of 'Eagle' but just as my sister let me down in not buying 'Bunty' or 'Jacky' herself, so did my brothers with their disinterest in Eagle. It remained only vaguely on my radar with just the occasional Eagle Annual to revisit. I had no idea until much, much later how successful it had been, but I still remember my hunger to read more of 'smokeman' – a character apparently with the ability to transform his body into smoke, who I must have read less than a handful of times.

The British comics appealed to the imagination of youth through 'acting out', as in 'Dennis the Menace', 'Beryl the Peril' or Desperate Dan's insatiable appetite. It seemed to me the most limited kind of fantasy, the 'bad boy/girl' who is the centre of attention. The great alternative was the occasional surreal humour strip, like 'the numbskulls' with the setup of characters operating separate parts of an individual.

Figure 3 The Art of the Beano British comic



But this was not really science fiction or fantasy, just a premise explored in a strictly proscribed fashion. For the reader desperate to escape, there was no meat here. The desire for something different burned itself into my memory as, not the presence, but the absence of 'smokeman'.

Much, much later, the collective imagination would wreak apocalyptic revenge on D C Thomson in the form of VIZ magazine. There was such a breath of fresh and pythonishly-funny air to be had from 'Nude Motorcycle Girl' with its policemen incapacitated by lust. The joke may have been short-lived but one was grateful as well as amused. In the US the unstoppable Stan Lee would come up with his own version, in 'Not Brand Ecch'. Funny and irreverent as it was, for the same reason we loved Viz, we hated this! If the first thing we would feel was gratitude to Viz, for taking our part, then from the same feeling, for something that so made fun of what we so loved, the last thing we would feel was gratitude!

The Marvel stories would become available to most English children through black and white reprints, of which 'Fantastic' and 'Terrific' were the first of many incarnations. Similarly, small booklets of reprints of the 50s monster and mystery tales would occasionally surface, such as 'Uncanny Tales' (see the Wikipedia entry on Alan Class comics). Coming from the imaginatively desolate barren plains of 'Desperate Dan', these stories were a cold glass of water for the hungry mind, yet nothing else was so immersive as the original American full-colour editions that could be had – for a price – from certain second hand bookshops. I'd be forever grateful to these comics in particular for the fantastic voyage their creators took us on, but I'd also be curious, as I am to this day, at the age of fifty-three, at the sheer intensity of the experience of reading these comic magazines. When I was eighteen, my college course invited me to write an essay on the subject of my choice, and I remember cutting a few of my most beloved comics up to use them in illustration. One day, I'd earn enough to read every comic ever written by Stan Lee, I thought. Meanwhile, this was my formative experience of comics: the black-and-white reprints, mixed with the all-too-few full colour originals that were so special, alongside the realisation that current 70s and 80s comics were infinitely poorer.

The comics from a few years previously that might be had second hand were those from the later run of Dr Strange, after Marie Severin had taken over as main illustrator, as she would on the Hulk, too.

Of course, the Hulk is much more famous. From the first, Dr Banner was a monster of the Frankenstein variety and would become a brilliant study in misunderstood power, in the science fiction genre, and more, depending on what you were willing to read into it. Initially, the Hulk was drawn by Steve Ditko and it is a fascinating mis-fit to look back now. The combination of characterisation in the Hulk's dim-witted persona and the central thesis of power – the angrier he gets the stronger he gets – meant it suited neither the majesty of Kirby nor the moods of Ditko - who would of course be instrumental in defining Marvel's most successful misunderstood teenager, Spider Man. Where Stan Lee's literary approach would reach its apotheosis in the popular imagination in the co-creation of Spider Man and his supporting cast, one feels that Dr Strange was no less Steve Ditko's personal creation, the development of a single tale of the mysterious East into a continuing superhero fable and a definitive statement in the fantasy genre.

Fantastic and Terrific gave me my earliest consciousness of American Comics but it was a later British reprint, 'The Mighty World of Marvel', which allowed me to lay down my education concerning them. Whereas Hulk, Spiderman and the Fantastic Four were the staples of this magazine, and it quickly became evident that something very special was happening, because of my age my earliest memories of Dr Strange are from the Marie Severin run. Her illustrations of breathtaking creations like Zom, Nebulos and The Living Tribunal were images which I would carry with me throughout the rest of my life. Here, smokeman: this is what you need to match up to; this is the very best of what I have been shown.

Figure 4 The Art and Imagination of Marie Severin



The Living Tribunal



Zom



Nebulos

But if this was the highpoint it was built on the groundwork for Dr Strange laid most completely by Steve Ditko. If Ditko's pencils lacked the artistic polish that Marie Severin or Gene Colan could command, then they in turn lacked the story-telling expertise that Ditko's long experience commanded. And it was that expertise – the ability to tell a great story combined with the great stories they had to tell – that made 60's Marvel such a phenomenon, to this day. Marvel wasn't just bringing these characters through the stories fully into the light, it was inventing the very process of doing so. The early Dr Strange stories are of such interest because they reveal the workings of creation, in what was being tried and what was being rejected as well as what was being built upon.

Initially Dr Strange is a shadowy, moody, heavily Eastern-looking character. He tackles haunted houses, mysterious figures from the past (perhaps, revealed as famous in a twist ending typical of the 50's), and alien invasions as well. But before long the character settles into his sinewy Errol Flynn style heroic mould with just the main supporting characters in particular the arch-foes and the trusted mentor, companions and love interest. As befitted the audience at the time, this isn't a brawler whose strength is in his fists but a contemplative, even reluctant hero. He is approachable not just through my world in the memory of my own childhood, but still now, in adulthood, I believe; and hope to show.

So how do we adults approach the world of Dr Strange? We might be coming from somewhere between Aleister Crowley and Dan Brown. We might have heard Crowley's name directly, and know the dark story of 'the beast', or we might have heard the name indirectly, linked from Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, say.

We have certainly heard the name Dan Brown, and – if you are old, like me – you may recall the furore over the original source material as was presented in the earlier worldwide bestseller, the 'Holy Blood and The Holy Grail'.

But both are a dark beginning to dark ends of paranoia and delusion, respectively. To trace the lit path forward we'd have to go back and start from an earlier time perhaps to a world of alchemists where the leading light was a figure as renowned as Sir Isaac Newton. Dr Strange inhabits an alchemical world, we can observe. His incantations more often than not refer to alchemical mists, flames and vapors:

'the Mists of Munnopor'

'the Vapors of Valtorr'
'the Flames of the Faltine'
'the Winds of Watoomb'
'the Shield of the Seraphim'

Strange and his colleagues have houses populated by Steve Ditko with steaming braziers and smoking dishes. This is all alongside mysterious idols, crystals, orbs and the occasional wand. In place of the witches broomstick we may have the levitating cloak, but the creation is much more than just a transplant as we'll see.

From the mystical world of alchemy I suppose we would trace a path forward to the 'New Age' mysticism of today. We might then see Strange as a mix of astrologer, guru and Derren Brown or David Blaine, though with rather more power and much less celebrity. Suppose that Uri Geller started off with the power to really bend metal, and suppose it was something he thought he could give to certain others...

However, just as Strange himself is a figure that changes his appearance becoming more distinct and better defined over time, so the world of Dr Strange is in flux at its beginning. Initially then, we are told that people can and do approach Strange to ask for his help when in extremis, yet this comes to form no or a tiny part of his later adventures. Mostly, Strange will become concerned with threats that are self-identified.

In the early adventures, there are many 'walk-on' parts as the series finds its feet, both from individual characters and from whole worlds. The 'famous character from the past' is revealed, but this only happens once. Strange thwarts an invasion by aliens, but again this only happens once. He visits another dimension and overthrows the despot, and that particular despot and dimension do not appear again. All of which might appear distracting, but actually serves to emphasise that this is a series which may be finding its feet, but already knows perfectly well where it wants to be going.

What Marvel arguably does best under the genius of Stan Lee (and is the reason we fans so love him) is to take a story to its full conclusion. In the first story, the hero beats the villain, but can he beat him again, in the next story? What if the villain has a partner, in the story after that? What if the villain has double the power of the hero? What if the villain has double the power of the hero, and the hero loses his powers? What if the villain has a cube that make his every thought come true? What if...? It gets crazy.

Nobody dies. These are not stories solved by the fastest gun. They are not even stories solved by firing a gun. Stan Lee sets himself the task of winning not by brawn but by brain. It is in the last moment that the tables get turned, at the very last minute when all hope seems lost, that is when the hero snatches victory. Those stories are the most inspiring, the ones that offer escape to the best of all possible worlds. Stan Lee (with help) did it apparently effortlessly, apparently across the whole stable of Marvel comics, apparently for ten whole years. It is why the word 'genius' applies.

Baron Mordo as the arch-nemesis of Dr Strange will be bested but the reward for besting him will be a new, unbeatable arch-nemesis, in Dormammu – and that is just the beginning. What we will see in Dr Strange's creative arc is a continued story played out over twenty or thirty issues of the monthly comic, 'Strange Tales'. The character-driven study of conflict here rivals what, for me, remain the very best of the two greatest archetypes of the Marvel stable: Spider-Man's early conflict with the Master-Planner (Spider-Man #32 and #33, see Figure 3) and the Fantastic Four's continued conflict with Doctor Doom (Fantastic Four #39 and #40, see Figure 3).

It is a subject we will come onto: when art and writing converge to reach a climax of the sublime. Actually, it is almost possible to make the same claim of perfection for Strange. The strength of Lee's stories won't be matched by the strength of Steve Ditko's plotting in 'The Search for Eternity' – assuming I very unfairly ascribe this to Ditko *because* it is not so successfully ended – but Ditko will provide something quite different in his unforgettable build-up for Lee. It is in his illustration of the surgeon's hands.

It is poetically appropriate that Stephen Strange should have had a skill in his hands as a surgeon because the source of Dr Strange's sorcery throughout the Ditko run is the gesturing through hands and fingers to create a spell.

Figure 5 *The Many Spells of Dr Strange*



What we are shown is a highly visual and fully consistent rationale of spellcasting in battle. This isn't the battle between greater and greater force-blasts of other stories – the biggest gun/fastest on the draw we see so often. Rather it is the intelligent, even artistic battle of skill we might see in the fencer's swordfight.

And I ascribe this to Ditko rather than the Lee-Ditko pairing only because it is never explicitly stated that Strange is a stronger sorcerer than Arch-foe Baron Mordo because he is such a good surgeon.

There is another story line I want to give Ditko and not Lee-Ditko, for no good reason other than a feeling. It is the one where Strange is trying to escape a Mordo who suddenly has vastly increased power. Without spoiling the story: Dr Strange eventually wins out through a bluff involving the Sun.

As a point of consistency with our world, the extremes of the Sun's centre are a place where sorcery ceases to work in the same way one could say that science ceases to work. That is, no science can take us into the Sun, and we can't explore it. The laws of science still work but the Sun is too extreme an environment for them to be useful to us. It is again poetic 'world-building' to declare that the same would be so for magic, if it existed. But like the idea that sorcery might *require* manual dexterity - like playing a musical instrument - this plot-point is not further explored.

This is a Doctor not of time, but of space. If Dr Who famously travels in time, then Dr Strange could be said to travel through space, in time. Frequently, Ditko illustrates a portal or path which the Doctor can take to reach his destination, after a journey Lee usually describes as 'a time which cannot be measured'. The path which is drawn by Ditko will curve and twist and loop back on itself, seemingly arbitrarily. It looks like a ribbon because it is two-dimensional. I take this to mean

that the clearest way for Ditko to illustrate his story, is to imply that there is a hidden third dimension for Dr Strange – that, in fact, he is able to create or open an arbitrarily short third dimension between any two points. Often, he travels from one place to another instantly.

[ILLO: Travels of Doc Strange]

Although this seems the simplest explanation to me, other fans have taken a different view, (there is more to read on the Internet, and more on this below) but I remember, when I was eight years old the third doctor, Patrick Troughton, with his companions Jamie and Zoe, were thrown out of the Universe completely in a story called 'The Mind Robber'. I can still remember the white screen which represented the dimension of 'nowhere', so that made an impression just as deep on me.

For all these reasons: the mysterious alchemical incantations; the fixtures and fittings of Strange's house and world; the consistent logic and the physicality of magical gesture, I find this early Dr Strange of Lee and Ditko the best-realised of all the creative teams I've seen for the character, and one of the best realised of all the Marvel superheroes introduced in the Sixties.

STAN LEE'S MARVEL COMICS GROUP

The first Dr Strange I bought from a Newsagent in England that was reasonably near to me was Dr Strange Volume 2, #4.

The purchase represented a sea change in the distribution of American Comics in the UK. Previous to this, I only saw comics for sale on holiday at the seaside or in 2nd hand shops. There was no steady supply and so no predictable sequence to them.

Dr Strange #4 went on sale in America in October 1974. It would have been a good few months later that a copy got to my newsagents, in my fourteenth year. After being cancelled in the late sixties, Dr Strange had been relaunched under Steve Engelhart with a new artist, Frank Brunner. At last I was going to receive my comics regularly and I would build up a small collection over the years to follow. But there were an awful lot of bad comics out there, and not very many good ones. Without friends with the same interest, you'd end up finding out which were bad only after you'd bought them.

(Poss segue to fanzines & Issue 1's)

Frank Brunner was an artist a cut above even Gene Colan and Marie Severin, just as was the work of obviously the best artist of the era: Neal Adams. Adams' work was already receiving a premium on the prices for 2nd hand comics. The success of comics from the sixties onward gradually began to draw in the most talented. For populist fans like myself, it was like the difference between Picasso and Dali: one was a brilliant painter who could do something no-one else could do; the other couldn't draw.

For a comics fan, art is nothing to do with Art. That is to say, Jack Kirby derives directly from Michelangelo and this is not a continuum in which Roy Lichtenstein has a space. Just as obviously to us: Ditko derives from the romanticism of, say, Raphael, where Tracy Emin or Damien Hirst are simply not present. Artists of light and shade like Colan and Severin are in the Rembrandt mold, and this where also is a creative artist like Hockney. And this was the mold also of Brunner and Adams.

There is another tier, where Emin and Hirst do appear, but I digress. We'll come on to the art of the comics when we've finished with the characterisation. Meanwhile I'll continue with my specific example of Doctor Strange.

In 1971 the film 'Easy Rider' was the biggest grossing box office hit of the year. It was, some said, when the geeks took over Hollywood from the Old Masters. Perhaps in the same way, Engelhart and Brunner were geeks taking over the failed Doctor Strange to remake it under new rules. It was certainly very different.

Gone were the complex, artistic hand-gestures which were so key to the sorcery as told by Ditko. In their place, were just blasts from the hands; hands as guns. Gone was the deft meld of characterisation and plot building to an unbearable and unknown peak; giving way instead to a plot that just explained itself as it went along. Gone even was the hero, replaced now by a dark Superman. Although Engelhart stayed, Brunner was quickly moved onto bigger and better projects, like 'Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction' where his art graced the first cover. Gene Colan then returned as the main artist but with the same dark story-telling.

It very much was not to my taste at the time. If I had been an American teenager it might have been different. Growing up with regular access to comics and the ability to catch up on missed issues, I might have been tired of the Stan Lee & Marvel 'formula' by the time it flared out in the early seventies. I might have been hungry for a revolution, led by my fellow geeks. I was certainly more open then to dark story-telling. But as it was I'd had nowhere near enough of Lee and I knew that this wasn't the same at all. I discontinued this title in preference to other comics.

What is perhaps most interesting in hindsight is to see how Gene Colan handled the demands of following on from Ditko when the new story revisited Dormammu's domain. Although I only have the non-colour reproduction, you can see in Figure 6 that the Dread One's worldspace has been turned into a place, with a ground, contrary to all of Ditko's imagining. His delicate folding pathways through the dimensions have been extruded into flat, suspended walkways, hanging in space.

Figure 6 Dormammu's Dread Domain, by various



*Artists renderings
subsequent to Steve Ditko.*

The curved edges do look very nice, but they don't mean anything. It is as if art had been turned into design, it makes me think.

But if this was such a deep low in my view, what do I say was the greatest high of Doctor Strange?

I've already mentioned I'd quietly concluded in my late-thirties that Spider-Man's battle against the Master Planner presented in those two issues (Spider-Man #32 and #33, see Figure 3) probably represented the peak achievement of the entire ongoing story of Spider-Man, then and later. Spider-Man's monologue when he is trapped under a collapsed ceiling that he can't quite lift has the awe-inspiring simplicity of the Gettysburg Address. Like Lincoln's speech, or like Michelangelo's David, it isn't just a good comic, it is an inspiration of what humankind can achieve.

There are more important Spider-Man stories, and there are more visual Spider-Man stories, and these two stories possibly only have their true impact after earlier and/or later stories have drawn the reader fully into this brilliantly-realised parallel world. But I was quietly gratified when I visited the Victoria And Albert Museum in London one day to find a visiting American comics exhibition, which amongst selected comics showing their cover art from the sixties had Spider-Man #33, open at the pages displaying the monologue, as the centrepiece.

Just as thrilling for Dr Strange fans is the story told by Steve and Stan in the lead-up to Strange Tales #143. (You can see these covers on the website Cover Browser which truly has the 00,000s of comic covers that my yellowed ads blithely offered - albeit just the covers!) In particular, if you are going to read Strange Tales #142 and #143 then do make sure you build up to them first! It would be too much to start with the finest two-part story of Lee's career on Dr Strange. You might want to read the story of Strange's first meeting with Nightmare very early in the run because it sets the stage for Lee's particular brand of stories where heroes triumph over more powerful foes. In fact, it is the continuing story of virtue's triumph over a greater power which is the wider story of the Dr Strange arc. So, initially, Strange the novice has to overcome Mordo the villainous initiate. When he does, over a long series of increasingly desperate battles, Lee ups the ante by introducing Dormammu as a more powerful enemy. Gradually, Strange faces down the various challenges posed by this duo, each more dangerous than the last. Of course, I cannot give you the innocence of the child that does not know the outcome, but I can leave you to track down these stories for yourself. Leave me instead look at #142.

The story starts half-way through #141, for Lee's writing is a form of artistry of the comic-book medium. Although the comic books are monthly, under Lee they will often form a continuing story. Thus, at the end of one story the Hulk falls into the sea, and the next story starts with him surfacing. We'll see the same in the Fantastic Four. Lee is so confident in the medium that he will begin to tell the next story *before* the current story has finished. This is streets ahead of Alan Moore's tricky segueing in 'Watchmen'. No other writer has been so adept. It creates the illusion of time passing in the parallel world like in this one; you inevitably feel drawn ahead, in anticipation of what happens next, and the first challenge Strange faces in the new story-line is set at the end of #141. It is resolved not at the end of #142 as a lesser writer would, but is resolved in the first couple of pages of #142 as the story relentlessly moves into higher gear.

It is thus no spoiler to say that Strange discovers himself imprisoned, bereft and dis-enabled right at the start of this story. Like 'the Man in the Iron Mask' the hero is in a classic situation of powerlessness, but even more imaginatively than in the former story, this time the hero is not just masked but gloved. In an update on the old story, rendered visually unforgettable by Ditko's designs, Strange cannot see or speak. He cannot use his hands, and his mystical aids like his cloak and amulet – as said, the modern equivalent of broomstick and wand - are in the hands of his enemies.

Lee of course is one step ahead of us and knows exactly how our hero is going to engineer his escape in a way which is wholly plausible – but only within the world created by Lee and Ditko - utterly engrossing, quite terrifying, and most cruel of all, can only be written once. By the end of this first-part issue, Strange has got his body to safety, but that is all. He is still bereft and dis-enabled. He

has only a moment to pause and reflect before the battle is rejoined next issue. Of course, a true hero, he uses this moment to reflect, becoming even more determined.

Ditko had co-created both Dr Strange and Marvel's runaway success, Spiderman. Arguably, the best action stories presented in the sixties for these two characters were illustrated by Steve Ditko: the Strange Tales run ending with #143 and Spider-Man #32 and #33. Yet, Ditko could just be replaced, and was replaced, for the main period of both Spider-Man's and Dr Strange's run. Marie Severin took over on Dr Strange as we know, and John Romita took over the art on Spiderman. When Lee himself began to wind down, it was Spiderman he continued to write and when he couldn't do so for Marvel, it was he and Romita who did so by producing the syndicated newspaper strip.

It may be claiming too much but I wonder if Ditko's rendering of Dormammu's poly-dimensional space, so very rich previous to this, shows his irritation. The comic panel background rendered as nothing more than a sequence of strings seems like him 'phoning in' his art, for no good reason unless he just feels so little appreciated.

Figure 7 The Many Worlds of Dr Strange





Ditko 'phones it in' when rendering the surroundings in this scene.

It must have been hard for Ditko especially. Kirby had brought Captain America with him, created during World War II for Timely comics, and even Kirby would eventually be driven over to DC by the gap between worker and management.

Indeed, it wasn't just Ditko feeling the pressure, DC too was suffering from the onslaught of Marvel's creativity. It is difficult to assign a comic cover like Lois Lane 63 other than to frustration.

Figure 8 Lois Lane #63



A more constructive response would come right at the end of the sixties.

DC was nothing like Marvel. Stan Lee's boundless energy and the genuine wit he brought to FOOM, the MMMS, Stan's Soapbox and letter's pages all combined to make Marvel seem like it was going somewhere and you, the reader, were part of that. Marvel was a teenager's company, where I could explore both beauty and heroism. By comparison, DC was a pre-teenager's, pre-pubescent's company.

Superman was unbeatable and the course of true love ran straight, smooth and very slow. Green Lantern or the Flash were vehicles for the special effects on their pages where, like a dream, things would all return to normal at the end, whatever had happened. Often witty and always entertaining, but there wasn't anything that needed explaining, at DC.

Writers and artists were mostly freelance and would often work for both companies one after the other. Ditko was established in the DC worlds, producing Creeper and Spectre for DC, the former of which he had created and the latter of which was the equivalent of a 'Dr Strange' for the DC lineup. When Kirby went to DC, in the late sixties, the Silver Age was drawing to a close, but as with the breakup of the Beatles, individuals inside and outside the formative group were too talented to be kept down. There was a final Act to be written.

By this time, Neal Adams was drawing most of the DC covers and was clearly the most talented artist of his day. Adams himself was the source of the most creative response to the constriction of DC's worlds, and indeed comic art of the day. When Neal Adams paired with Denny O'Neil, Kirby and Lee briefly had a pairing to match up to their best work. The pair briefly worked for Marvel producing an iconic Lee-styled story combining action, drama and a moral twist on a comic called X-Men. The character-driven story of the Sentinels and their creator, the memorable Larry Trask, is a short-lived masterpiece, but the brief flaring wasn't enough to boost sales on the failing book and the pair didn't stay.

A Neal Adams comic cover had a dynamism and emotional punch that Jack Kirby, as Marvel's main cover artist, couldn't match. Kirby's constructive, creative response? On his own, Kirby had created a 'fourth world' and seconded the existing DC superheroes into it. It was a legitimate continuation of the Marvel approach, with the terrific and genuinely dangerous Darkseid and wonderful concepts like the Anti-Life Equation. If it wasn't as commercially popular, nor as

critically admired, then it was only because Kirby's 'John Lennon' now lacked the soft touch and sheer likability of Lee's 'Paul McCartney', not because he was creatively diminished in any way.

Nevertheless, where Kirby had created a world, the fans had long recognised that Lee/Kirby had created all the worlds that were needed to populate something much bigger, in what we all referred to as the Marvel Universe. It wasn't an acrimonious split. He returned to Lee's open arms at Marvel in short order.

It was left to O'Neill and Adams to write the final scene to the drama. Back at DC they were soon doing their best work so far on Batman, and I don't think it has been matched even by Frank Miller.

This Batman was like a Spiderman, all grown up, with his scientific flair turned to a serious purpose. Combining James Bond with Sherlock Holmes, Adams' Batman is less touchy, less smart-mouthed, less over-confident. At last the Joker and Two-Face became serious characters to rival Marvel's best villains. For imagined realism, 'The Joker's Five Way Revenge' (Batman #251) is as fine a comic magazine as has ever been produced, in any age, not just my gilded silver age.

The one failing in this version of Batman remained the convenient 'playboy' wealth. Where Spiderman had had a genuine 'ordinary' life out of costume, this Batman had little use for Bruce Wayne. So, when O'Neill and Adams collaborated to create a 'grown-up' version of the dream character 'Green Lantern', events were set for the production of the comics equivalent of Citizen Kane, as indeed is how this run has become remembered.

Green Lantern/Green Arrow bought subjects to the comics page that even Marvel wouldn't touch. The series brought over-population, bigotry, overt morality and most famously of all, drugs, to the attention of its intended teenage audience. Again, like Citizen Kane, it was perhaps not as much fun as its peers, and didn't sell well to the fans. The nascent medium of comics had been seeking the magic of 'relevance' to break through into the mainstream, and adulthood. GL/GA achieved it overtly, just as Batman #251 had achieved it covertly, by turning the Joker into the ruthless twisted killer that Heath Ledger would later personify on film.

Even though it has people being killed by a now-ruthless Joker, Batman #251, has the same clear moral certainty of Lee's Universe. It is as much fun! So, is it overly judgemental to complain that the straight line that connects genius together throughout the Silver Age of comics also runs so clearly from light to dark? Is it a way of moving on from the previous highs to yet new heights to consign our stories to the darkest areas from time to time? To put it more personally, am I wrong to have held a question in my mind since I was a teenager myself? Wrong or just sentimental, as maybe there was nothing to learn?

Nothing to learn from a bald history maybe, but there is something for sure to learn about a new medium. Here is a thing: comics are a medium, different to the medium of say canvas or paint, as much as film is a medium different from photography. Although I think it is there I don't think you would obviously learn what is unique about that medium from either Lee & Ditko's Dr Strange or O'Neill & Adams' Batman. That is what we are here to find out. We are looking at the art to see the art-form. And we are doing that so that whenever we see it again, however long it takes or however far we must go, we will recognise it again.

That is how love works, right?

For that we may need to do some more work, and so we could do worse than start with the hardest working man in comics: Jack Kirby.

THE ART AND ARTISTRY OF COMICS

Lee/Ditko's early Spiderman was a breakthrough in comics realism and marks the start of what would be recognised by fans independently and instinctively as 'the Marvel Universe'; stories which extrapolated a fantastic premise into a recognisable, almost realistic, setting.

In other words, where DC had created many parallel worlds, fans instinctively recognised that Marvel were creating a self-consistent set of independent-but-linked worlds – a Universe. The extrapolation still happened at DC, with great villains like the Joker and Bizarro, but they happened in worlds which had to be kept separate. Since Superman could not oppose the Joker, nor Batman Mr Mxyzptlk, they could only meet under carefully controlled conditions, and that meant in a separate, lesser comic title, like ‘World’s Finest’.

At Marvel, each hero was in his own world too, but behind that lay a consistent, single Universe. This allowed Marvel to seamlessly include one hero as a guest-star in another’s story, at any time. Like with DC, Marvel was creatively instinctively exploring a set of heroes, but unlike DC, Marvel took the approach of exploring a set with its villains, just as much. No villain was tied to a single hero and part of the fun was seeing a villain like Dr Doom or the Mandarin prove he was a worthy nemesis to his arch-foe. Super-villains even teamed up and appeared in their own groups periodically.

What I think fans recognised instinctively and named as the Marvel Universe was along with the content of the comics also the form of them. And I think this is revealed by the arc of the Fantastic Four, the first and the greatest Lee/Kirby collaboration, which for one hundred issues was the heart if not the moral centre of the Marvel Universe – of the art-form which Marvel was making out of the humble comic.

In fairness to him, I don't think one can really understand what happened in the sixties without an appreciation of Jack Kirby. It was the Lee/Kirby pairing which had sparked the revolution; it was the Lee/Kirby pairing which would extend across the full ten years of this incredible silver age; and it would be impossible to say whether one partner scaled greater heights in that time than the other.

Like a good three-act drama, the FF's story-arc has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning really is the cover of the first issue, Fantastic Four #1. Here we see a large monster climbing out of the ground and four characters entangled with it. What I can see here is Kirby's sheer joy in the fun of being able to 'flame on' and fly, stretch, become invisible and so forth. Lee's contribution is the mysterious super-strong ugly-scaled, orange coloured man (“I've become a, – thing!”). If three people are blessed with powers beyond their dreams, one is cursed by his: the Thing.

Figure 9 The Silver Age



Like a family – and not like a gang, as in the Avengers – the Thing's curse will become a problem for the whole team – but not yet. In this first phase of the Fantastic Four's life, the Thing's curse is overshadowed by the external adventures of the family team. With Lee's plotting and Kirby's extraordinary inventiveness, we start off in, but quickly leave behind, the monster stories of the fifties. The monster climbing out of the ground; the twist-ending (one rocket for a whole planet? – just shrink the population!) are pushed aside just as Dr Strange's mystery-comic origins had been left behind. Here they are replaced by recurring because fascinating characters like the Hate Monger and the Impossible Man. like the culmination of SpiderMan's early phase in the two-parter around the Master Planner, the culmination of this first phase, the two-part story in FF #38 and #39, is one of the greatest Marvel comics ever published.

In the Battle of the Baxter Building we see the FF settle down fully as a team of equals for all their problems. In one of Lee's finest, most archetypal plots, the FF have lost their powers, and their arch-enemy Doctor Doom has taken over their headquarters in the Baxter Building. It is an impossible task, but they won't give up and Reed Richards turns his inventiveness to trying to simulate their miraculous powers through mechanical means. Of course it is a hopeless task – and one of the most exciting reads you could have. In the end, they have retrieved their powers. But meanwhile as well as losing his strength, the Thing had turned back into Ben Grimm – his curse was ended and he was a normal man again. Why would a normal man ever want to again become “a, a – Thing?”

The resolution of this, the central difficulty of the imaginative premise leads on to the second phase of the arc from about FF 40 to about FF 60. With a solid premise Lee and Kirby are now free to go to town – and go to town they very much do. This period sees Kirby's imagination roaming the spaceways populating outer space with living planets, alien races like the Kree and Skrulls, and most memorably of all of course, the Silver Surfer and the fascinating 'Galactus', who eats worlds. The Earth is explored anew, above with the Inhumans, and below with the Moleman, and the dimensions are probed with the astonishing 'Negative Zone'. Lee and Kirby save the secret societies (AIM and Hydra in place of James Bond's Spectre) for elsewhere. As a family, this group faces other 'familial' foes, as the Inhumans, or outsiders, as the Moleman.

Kirby's art which is blockish and crude to start with approaches heights of sublimity as he brings to life characters which not only don't exist, but never existed before. His story-telling sense becomes ever sharper too. His menacing Doctor Doom looming over buildings cover for the Battle of the Baxter Building is an all-time classic but his early streets falling away into the background to emphasise action is replaced by a more detailed and realistic depiction of action. He was certainly never one to shirk hard work. The cosmic canvas suited Lee's scripting and plotting as much, and the Silver Surfer was particularly close to his heart, alongside the enigmatic 'Him'.

Throughout this period, the characterisation deepened and matured as a more contemplative mood set in. In particular, the Thing's characterisation was very effectively conveyed – primarily through the medium of thought! The knockabout comedy of he and the handsome, young Johnny Storm might segue into darker musings, but they'd always end with the frankly heroic rejection of self-pity: something like “if I go on like this, I'll need a towel to cry into”.

It is this ability of comics to show motivation underneath apparently illogical or counter-productive action which strikes me as the unique strength of comics over both books and films. So, although I've not heard any other fan ever say this, it is wholly apparent to me that comics are a unique medium for one reason above all others: comics have thought bubbles.

In the film 'Annie Hall', Woody Allen and Diane Keaton have a very funny scene where they are talking to each other and what each is really thinking comes up in the subtitles below them. It is witty and inventive, and most of all, it is rare. Most films don't try and show what people are

thinking. Usually, the point of film is to infer that from action. In this they follow on from the idea of a play: character is shown by action and speech and character drives plot.

Of course films and plays have voiceovers and narrators (and even asides to camera) where we know what a character is thinking because a disembodied voice tells us. The comics medium has this as well, and it is separate from the thought-bubble. The disembodied narrator's voice comes as a square box of text at the top or bottom of the panel, sometimes no more than the word 'meanwhile...'

That is, comics *can* have thought bubbles but actually, most comics don't. It seems like modern comics studiously avoid the employment of thought bubbles. Even a great favourite of mine such as 'Sin City' finds no use for the technique of showing thinking. It is more like a storyboard for a film.

This wasn't the case in the Marvel silver age comics. You can see it in the early Spiderman comics where Peter Parkers pacifist, 'nerdy' appearance is belied at every point by his thoughts. It is a lot of work to keep that up, and Spiderman is an exception. It wasn't needed in Dr Strange because there was no real 'secret identity', but thought is essential in Dr Strange as it is in the Fantastic Four and for the same reason: to show the motive for heroism. This and other comics of the era always showed a naturalistic understanding of the difference between speech and thought. Characters would often talk out loud when they didn't really need to – indeed when there is no one there to hear! Raising an interesting question about whether people should talk to themselves more often) but it doesn't cause friction when reading. In fact, Lee would sometimes become embarrassed by this exposition so he'd have another character say the equivalent of “thanks for stating the obvious”. But we readers never minded the exposition. It didn't make us self-conscious.

The sequential art of comics can condense time. It is a useful trick wherein characters can crack wise at the heart of an action sequence, as most often, Spiderman. But that is just a trick, like 'bullet-time' in movie special effects. The thought bubble is a mechanism which separates comics from books, films and plays. I think it is the basis for recognising a 'Marvel Universe' – DC had no equivalent for Marvel's thinking heroes. But even Marvel has only rarely – perhaps only, in fact, once - fully explored this aspect of its medium.

It did so, I argue, with the culmination of the second phase of Fantastic Four in 'This Man, This Monster'. In the climax of its rise, at around issue 58, the friction which has been underlying Ben Grimm's Thing finally boils to the surface as he rebels against his lot. Once the most important member (saving the others from Doom in the Battle of the Baxter Building), has the Thing finally turned against those he was once family to? Has he become their enemy?

Following the resolution of the most satisfying climax in this 60-strong story arc, the place of the FF is now fully established as both the moral and emotional centre of the Marvel Universe.

It is now getting late into the sixties. All of the main Marvel characters are established in their own magazines. Kirby's inventiveness is undimmed as we'll see in terrific creations like the Mad Thinker, but he's being matched by the newer creatives being drawn into the exciting new medium, and other comics companies are beginning to realise the need to catch up.

(Later on we'll see the fallout from all that on the medium of comics, in the creation of the first 'event': in the 'Crisis on Infinite Earths' storyline).

Lee is even more active than Kirby. As well as overseeing all the other work, his contribution to the Fantastic Four matches even Kirby's work rate. Once again, the series reaches a new height around Doctor Doom, with Lee's most brilliant conceit of all: how to defeat Doom, once and for all - by giving him his 'victory'.

As we climb the last years of the sixties into the seventies it seems like there is everything to play for. Lee never puts a foot wrong while Kirby's only concession to success is the tiniest indulgence of allowing himself the periodic full-page panel.

It can't last.

Sadly, it doesn't. Kirby leaves Marvel for the new challenge of the competition. It will prove to be a triumph for Kirby becoming again intuitively recognised by fans as a wholly successful one of DC's parallel worlds. They title it 'Kirby's "fourth world"'. Meanwhile Lee assigns his favourite Spiderman artist to take over on the Fantastic Four and he starts plotting alongside John Buscema's art.

Buscema is certainly flexible enough as an artist to move from the agile webslinger to the muscle-bound Thing, but he doesn't have Kirby's story-telling weight. Meanwhile, Lee is tired. He has presided over an entire era of comics which he was instrumental in initiating throughout the decade of a 'silver era'. In his own words "I was tired. I'd done an awful lot of plots". As a result, as we get past FF 100 what we see beginning is the same plot reused again.

This time when Ben Grimm storms out some of us can't help thinking "we've seen this before". And when the illustrators point of view is from above rather than the side, we are left cold, rather than moved.

Figure 10 *Ben Grimm's rebellion, by Buscema*



With hindsight I think this a rather better storyline, and idea, than I was willing to give it credit for at the time. Since Grimm's mind is being affected from outside, his actions have a completely different reason than previously, and it is a premise which does raise curiosity in the

reader beyond the direct outcome. But at the time, all I saw was my favourite characters behaving repellently. For me, as simply and quietly as that, the Silver Age came to an end.

I stopped reading or buying the Fantastic Four and never returned. I moved on to new comics and returned to old comics seeking that which I'd lost. And wondering about it.

We've seen that, from 'Dennis the Menace' to 'Desperate Dan', UK comics traditionally offered UK children an escape into fantasy. Or rather, a choice of escapes. I'd say that the choice is between a heroic prototype and a romantic prototype. Clearly, Jack Kirby is no Michelangelo, and yet, just as clearly he is an artist in the heroic mold that goes in a straight line right back to Michelangelo. Part of the excitement for a fan of art is to recognise this link.

The writing is also part of the art and arguably equally reflects this romantic/heroic divide. Other people would roughly divide into those who are clever (the Doctor archetype) and those who are strong (the 'Captain/Man' archetype).

By this reading Ditko's SpiderMan would become a new archetype, successfully combining equal parts of both, where, of course, Kirby's Captain America is aptly named, as an archetype. Again, Spider-Man's wisecracking, misunderstood scientist is as much Ditko as Lee, although it was clearly Lee's fondest creation. Kirby's Thor say, or Lee's Iron Man, are archetypes of the Captain, as being figures of authority or otherwise empowered: one is a Lord, the other rich; but with a corresponding weakness: one is lame, the other vulnerable.

The limitations of personal style become more obvious when one is asked to do the work of the other. Kirby's muscularity does not suit the lithe Dr Strange well as is shown by his covers for Strange Tales. Ditko's drawing works against Thor or the Hulk. It is a problem that those more skilled in drawing escape. Marie Severin draws both the Hulk and Dr Strange to equally good effect. Gene Colan draws Dr Strange yet also Captain America.

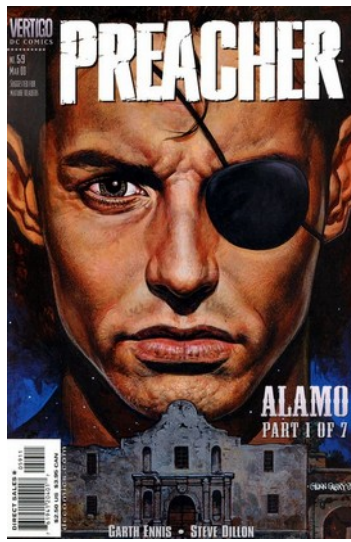
Because the effects are obvious to all, the artist quickly gets moved on if there is a mismatch in style. From the fans' point of view, the distinction is not between two sides but between front and rear. Most fans would prefer Colan's art to Ditko's simply because it is more realistic, and therefore easier to escape into. Alternatively, because of their skill in framing the emotional impact of the story, you can escape further into both Ditko's and Kirby's line-art than into lesser imaginings, even with finer art. The imagination counts for more with me. Although I am very interested in the difference between these artist's work I would not personally say that they align in two different ranks; I would not say that one is better, de facto, than the other, but I don't know what other fans would say.

An artist like Neal Adams commands a premium for his artwork attendant to the fans. In each generation there are such artists: Todd McFarlane; Glenn Fabry; Dave McKean; and perhaps the greatest artist of today, Alex Ross. Each of these has arguably presented a quantum leap forward in the artwork of the humble comic strip. McFarlane re-imagined Spiderman in the eighties in arguably the same way that Adams had produced the definitive Batman in the late sixties, meanwhile Fabry in the nineties brought a level of detail to his imaginary illustrations that was breathtaking in its realism, bringing imagination to life.

Figure 11 Great Art Beyond the Silver Age



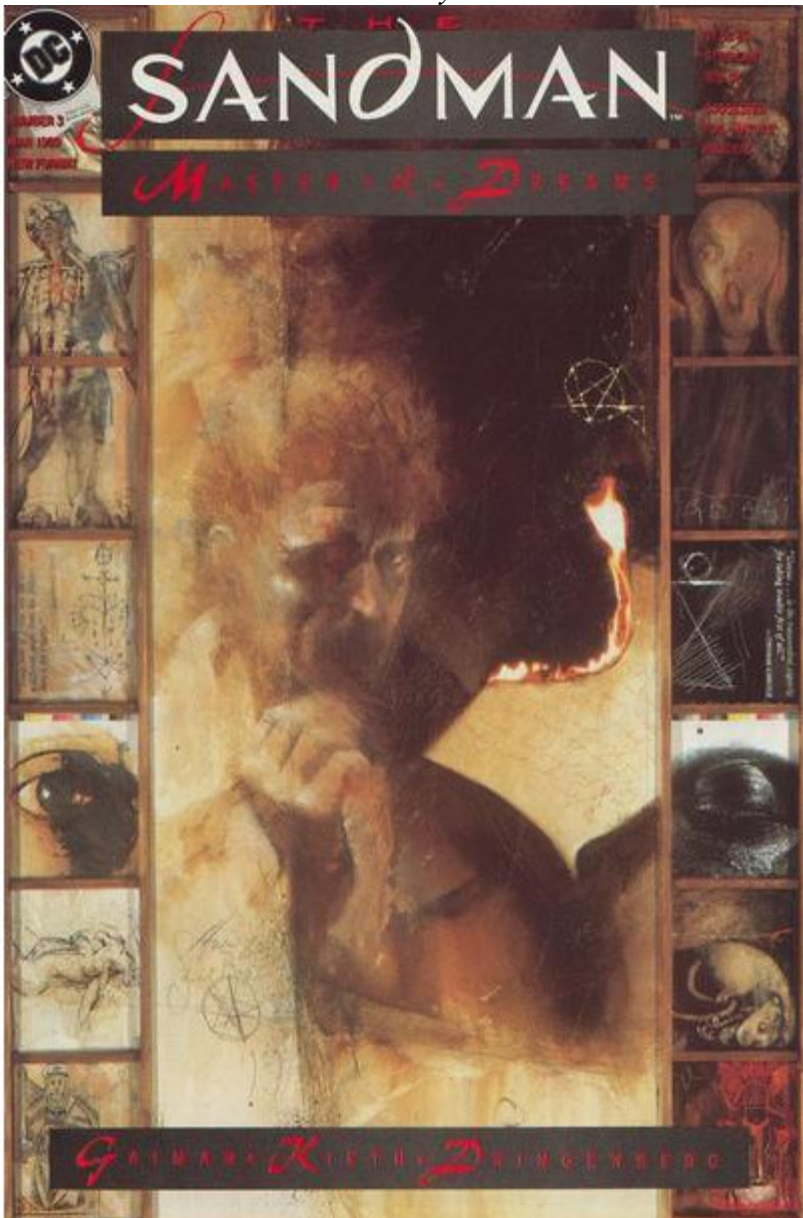
McFarlane



Fabry



Ross



McKean

Using a completely different style of illustration, McKean was a personal favourite. Although the Sandman stories were not to my personal taste, his covers quite literally took my breath away. I gasped when I first came across his work in the library. I didn't know you could do that with a comic cover and it seemed to me beautiful and brave. McKean is the comic artist who is creative with the form. McKean's covers for Sandman created the most notable post-Marvel comic for me before Frank Miller.

Although Neal Adams art had moved to the richer world of advertising with his success, with Dave McKean, it was legitimate to speak of him as a working artist, and as working in comics primarily. Although the character of Sandman created by Neil Gaiman was too dark for my affection, both Sandman and McKean's covers for it continued the revolution initiated by the geeks way back in *Dr Strange #4*. So would mainstream art and comic art somehow merge in my lifetime? Would the revolution run out of control?

We'll see the result shortly, but first let me return to the ranks. If I've listed the front rank as led by Adams, then Kirby, Colan, and co. would occupy the middle rank for us fans. Then, for a fan like me, there is also the rear rank. These are the artists whose art gets in the way of the comic; these are the artists I actively dislike.

It would be hard to find someone who either liked or disliked the art of the Beano. The house style is so strong the artist is generally uncredited. Neither was it the art that was so disappointing in a strip like 'The Numskulls' (see Figure 3). I was quite happy to have a thick outline of the head split simply into four or five rooms, each occupied by an operator of the relevant sense. We readers could all supply our own imagination to make this work. What was so disappointing in this strip, as in the comic as a whole, was the childishness of the stories. It takes rather more to entertain a child than just an adult being childish.

In the sixties, Stan Lee had started writing stories that were in many ways child-like but in very few ways childish. These were stories that gave you room to breathe. Marvel imposed no house style and it was a constant rediscovery to learn how each artist had their own personal style. Herb Trimpe drew the Hulk with a blocky solidity that was eminently suitable, and very recognisable against Gil Kane's fluid exaggeration, after Marie Severin's run. One wouldn't rush to judge whether either was better or worse than the other. That could come later in the privacy of a fan's final judgement. Mostly it was a pleasure to see how a different artist breathed life into new aspects of the story, as it was a pleasure to see how an artist's conception of Ditko's *Dr Strange* or Kirby's *Loki* matured over time (see Figure 1); to remember the humble beginning and the glorious peak.

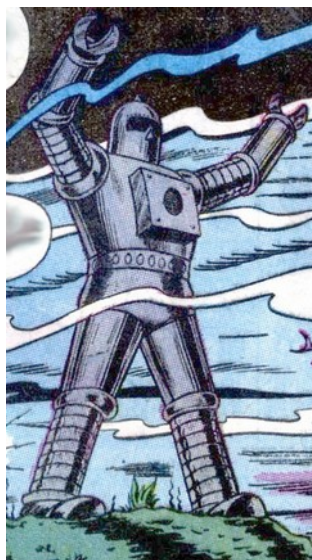
Mostly but not always. The biggest exception I can remember was the ludicrous art of Frank Robbins. If one is going to start out as a line artist then it makes sense to at least be able to draw an attractive line. One might not immediately have Ditko's sensuality, or Kirby's explosive dynamism, but one could at least draw basic anatomy surely? Well, here was an artist who couldn't yet draw, and who was illustrating *Captain America*, for goodness sake!

Major strips were drawn by artists I hated. When the Avengers started out they had some great, classic Stan Lee stories, but the art was drawn by Don Heck. His angular, awkward movement seemed out and out ugly to me but it was matched by awful composition. Don Heck even cropped up drawing *Iron Man* in the early days hobbling some more classic Lee storylines. It took me a long time to see Heck's art as stylised rather than inept. I later thought he was mismatched to the material more than to his profession. But I'd still run a mile from Frank Robbins.

I suppose I dislike Don Heck's art the way some people dislike Van Gogh or Picasso, but I don't think the same is true of Frank Robbins. Just as there is a divide between equals of Ditko and Kirby so there is of Robbins and, say, Bill Everett, who are equally bad artists.

Robbins work was always profoundly ugly, to me in a way that Everett cannot be accused of being. But Everett's work is simplistic in an equally ugly way. His robots for instance are as if drawn by a child, blocky cubes with pincers and aerials, even for the heads. Everett portrayal of action is similarly childish, talking – punch – talking, as opposed to the much more involving talking and punching of a better imagined scene. I think it may be the old problem of adults trying to entertain children by themselves becoming childish. The limitation in Robbins' and Everett' work, and perhaps in Heck's too, was present in themselves and just reflected in the art, maybe not necessarily present in the art.

Figure 12 *Not-so-good Art*



Robbins

Everett



Heck

This talk of the childish may, in due course, lead us naturally to a more systematic analysis, through the system of Transactional Analysis, and the Parent, Adult and Child.

Marvel may not have had a house style under Lee, but the market of teenage boys is necessarily an erotic one. The 'house style' of superhero comics would tend to muscle-bound heroes and the femme fatale and her opposite, the femme sans défence.

In later years, great artists like Rob Liefeld would suffer from pandering to this style, much complained about in the pages of online feminist fanzine Sequential Tart. Equally, the success of the style would continue to pull in better and better artists, until arguably the greatest of them all – the Rembrandt of both Marvel and DC Superheroes: Alex Ross.

Truthfully, Alex Ross is more similar in style to popular American painter Normal Rockwell than to Rembrandt. Both painters celebrate the human and both seem to bring character to life in the

image, as if the painting were hyper-real. He is working today, and I rather regret not buying an Alex Ross comic when I had the chance recently (because “I am much too old to be buying comics” – and this from the man who bought 'Bunty'!) I didn't like the storyline of 'Marvels' so it does not show off Ross' storytelling in my view, but other work has much better themes, and Ross is acknowledged as a great story-teller as well as the greatest of all artists.

When Easy Rider became the biggest-grossing film of 1971 it represented an inexorable rise of the geeks culminating in the film empires created by George Lucas, Stephen Spielberg and James Cameron which so wholly swept away the previous studio system of the classical era of film – arguably its 'silver age' - in the thirties and forties.

Looking back however, I have not seen a similar revolution in comics. If the revolution was initiated by the geeks way back in Dr Strange #4, then it is not a revolution I have seen running out of control. There may have been revolutionary books since the sixties – and of them all: Sandman; Watchmen; Preacher; Marvels; it is Frank Miller's Sin City that I would pick out for comment – but the themes and execution of Alex Ross hark forward in an evolutionary way, and backward just as much as forward. So, when Ross (with Paul Dini) sets Superman against starvation, as he does in one storyline, it seems an almost wistful harking back to the resolved Green Lantern/Green Arrow 'relevance' trend made so famous in the early seventies.

The art is in a class of its own. The story may be problematic, but to see the costume worn by a real superman, and to see the folds in the costume, almost photo-realistically, is to see something made real that never even existed in my imagination. (There are no folds in the costumes of Batman or Superman in the films).

To see this is to witness wonder. That is the truth about the medium of comics: from the lowly Beano and Jackie, through Eagle to the best comics of today, it is a medium of wonder, against say the medium of horror. Horror comics were eclipsed by film, and film is the medium of the 20th Century, as we well know. So will film simply come to eclipse the wonder of comics? It is already trying.

But film is an adult medium, and comics are not yet an adult medium.

When I was a teenager growing up I knew instinctively the difference between DC and Marvel. In Marvel comics, the heroes had girlfriends (though the course of true love was rightly rarely smooth) and they had problems. One was blind, another was lame, or had a weak heart. These were problems that did not go away between issues, and they could be compounded. In DC comics, the heroes didn't have any problems that couldn't be solved in a single issue. I had no need to feel guilty reading Marvel comics because they presented a view of the adult world which was adolescent rather than itself adult. But I eschewed DC (they weren't 'my' comics) as presenting a view of the adult world which was pre-pubescent, rather than teenage.

Every writer, including Stan Lee who we've recognised as the creator of the mold for adolescent comics, later wanted to create an adult comic. In the Silver Surfer, a Jesus figure, even Lee was unsuccessful. Mainstream art and comic art have not yet merged in the way that I envisage they will. The only writer who successfully created an adult comic, for me, was Frank Miller, with Sin City's 'Marv' character.

The unsuccessful nature of the revolution was apparent from the start of the Bronze Age, as the next era was dubbed, in the second run of Dr Strange in the Seventies. In a conflict between Wong, Dr Strange's assistant, and antagonist, Silver Dagger, Wong is despatched with a single kick. What happened to heroic battle, gaining the upper hand, and then being laid low with a dirty trick? Wong is no mage like his boss, but he is an expert in the martial arts. He should easily overcome the older man Silver Dagger – until the latter resorts quite unfairly to sorcery, rather than lose.

Along with the respect for battle, gone too is the delicate hand-gesturing of sorcery. Instead of the elaborate construction of offence against defence, hands serve merely to point the direction of the force-bolt; they too become punches. Thought bubbles are used for plot points which would be

better said out loud. And there are dramatics, but no drama, with the plot explained point by point as we go.

Dr Strange #1 is co-plotted by creative geek Steve Engelhart and fan-favourite artists Frank Brunner, but unlike in film and in IT where the revolutions are wholly successful, there is very little that is successful here, as was apparent to me at the time. As mentioned, I quickly stopped buying this version of Dr Strange. There was no love in it.

David Hockney presented a television program recently which revealed that many of the paintings of the old masters used photographic techniques to render their art realistically. Long before the invention of photographic film, the basic principles of light reflection were used to render an image that could be captured in painting. This was the era before the advent of classical painting, and after the mediaeval era. From the Egyptian hieroglyphics we know from school to the start of the medieval era, art was largely two-dimensional in representation. In about the thirteenth century, the principles of proportion began to be understood and it was then that art began to surpass the cartoon-style that we associate with its origins. It is arguable that this was the golden age for painted art, finding its highpoint with Da Vinci in the renaissance and culminating finally in the portraits of the Dutch Grand Masters, like Rembrandt. If the modern age follows the golden age, then Hockney harks back to Van Gogh and all between, in this respect.

My analysis then would say that the prototype for modern art was laid down in the earlier work. According to my understanding of Transactional Analysis (TA), the prototypes of painted Art might be Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Michelangelo and Raphael.

As peers for our purposes, these four can be categorised according to the dominant characteristic of each – with the control factor that one of the four has no dominant characteristic.

By this I mean that as TA identifies the personality as consisting always to a greater or lesser extent of three and only three components (the Adult – intellect; the Child – intuition & emotion; the Parent – social and self-conscience), then we can consider the personality types of each of these artists in terms of the archetypes of the components. The control has all components equal, and each is one third of the whole. Each of the other three artists has one of the components maximised; one component comprises an entire half of the whole. As fractions of 1, we can represent this by means of the classic pie chart, but which is which?

Is Michelangelo the Child, having the romantic, sensual inclinations of the archetypal lover? Are Raphael's paintings muscular and heroic reflecting his perfectionism? Is Da Vinci the leader of the group, finding a self-control which leads on to a mastery of the form? Or is that Rembrandt? Before I say what I think, you might like to consider your own view.

Painting has been going on perhaps as long as Homo Sapiens have had leisure. Before it was the sitting room – for watching TV – it was the drawing room; a room for the display and contemplation of drawings. It is an idea we take back into prehistory, to the very earliest cave dwellers, turning the bare rock of their walls into a drawing room.

Arguably, painting really took off in the mediaeval era, with the discovery of perspective. Before that, much Egyptian and Grecian Art seems to derive from a sort of “side view”, remembering the famous side, top and plan views we learned about in school. By the start of the Renaissance, all three dimensions are fully integrated and the next three centuries would be an investigation into light and shadow, far more magical qualities in the era before the electric or gas light. Of course, it is Rembrandt that stands out here, universally considered the greatest of all portrait painters.

I was struck when I visited St Peter's Church in Rome by the many stone cherubs adorning it, because I could have ascribed them all to Michelangelo. The realism and quality of execution of the chubby baby flesh was so great, and so much better than I was used to, that in my ignorance they all seemed as masterful as the famous 'Pieta'. I would not know the difference and it gave the impression that, at the time, this level of excellence would be commonplace. But we cannot go backward. Even if you wanted to, you would not be able to learn to sculpt a figure like the naked 'David'. After

Michelangelo, it would be a work of technical excellence, not a work of art. This impulse drives art forward, even on to the pitiless abstraction of Henry Moore, any direction but backward.

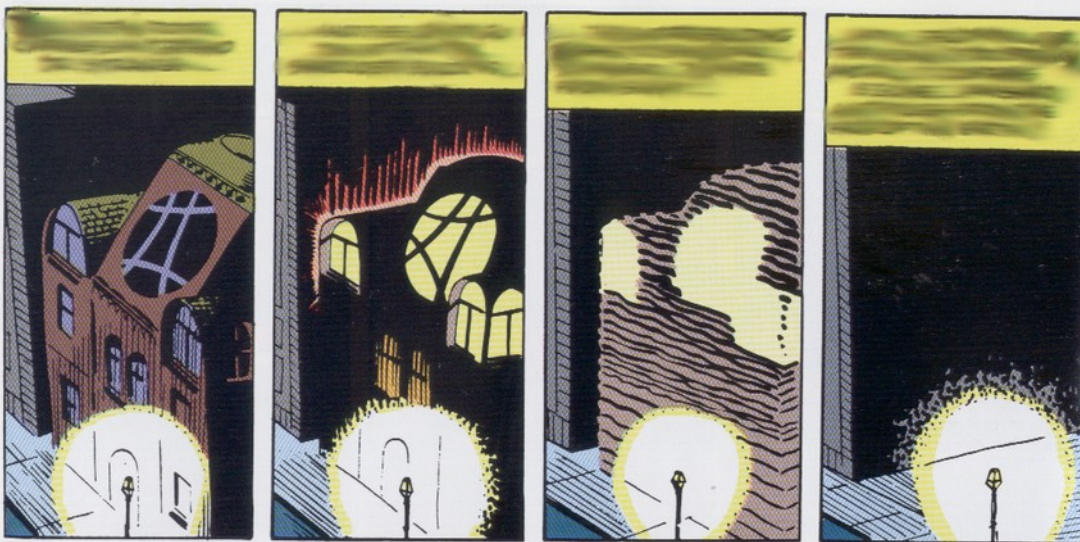
We cannot go back, but we do not forget. We cannot repeat Michelangelo, but his excellence is available to anyone who aspires to it, and can use it. What we do **not** see in the style of Steve Ditko is the muscularity and explosiveness of Michelangelo. I think it self-evident that Kirby is in the mold of the archetype of Michelangelo, as Ditko is in the mold of the romantic. That is where I am going to take our analysis. Muscularity and forcefulness, in most contexts, point me toward the Adult as the source archetype.

The archetype, for me, has a reality that is akin to the physical, even though paradoxically it is meta-physical. People think that identification by archetype will stifle individual style, but I find the opposite: it emphasises the individuality of style. No prototype completely matches the archetype, so any different type, no matter how slight the difference, extends the archetype. It also offers the possibility of getting it wrong.

It is a quite remarkable discovery for the comic book fan that almost all artists have a personal style. The non-comic book fan could easily live in ignorance of this, despite their artistic appreciation. If you only read 'the Beano' and 'Hotspur' as a child, you wouldn't know one artist from another. Conversely, when you get your portrait painted on holiday (accurately or in caricature) you see tremendous skill, but hardly any of the individuality of the artists. You'd be aware of different styles of drawing from Schultz's 'Peanuts' strip to 'Andy Capp' for example, but it's unlikely you'd call that Art. The extremes of Mondrian, Rothko or Picasso would also lead you away from rather than toward the idea of artistic style, I'd say. If you read what these artists say of their work, you could easily conclude that differences are all due to inclination and practise, rather than something intrinsic like nature.

But like two different actors playing the same part - as James Bond or Dr Who for example - when you see comic book artists at work via the same strip you see the style revealed in the art whether the artist wants that to happen or not. Drawing comics from imagination is so demanding that, for most artists, the impression of style is the strongest element of the art. It is so for Kirby and Ditko even whilst telling their stories; and for Neal Adams too, not so much with his story-telling as with the animation, the *life*, of his drawings.

Figure 13 Multi-panel Story-telling in Comics Art



Steve Ditko renders the mysterious enchantment



Jack Kirby reveals the astonishing truth



Neal Adams explains the mystery



'Winter Soldier' keeps us in the dark

Often the artist goes through an arc in the quality of their rendering as practise causes them to reach a peak, followed by a period of descent.

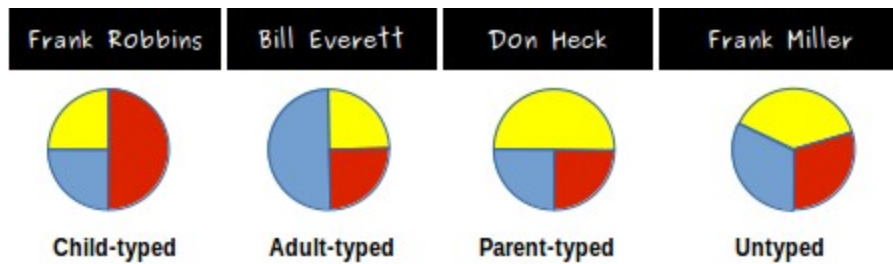
For the vast majority, this is a great pleasure. When Todd McFarlane takes over on Spiderman he breathes new life into the established story. Equally when P Craig Russell, longstanding artist on the worthy 'War Of The Worlds' strip in the seventies, moves to Dr Strange for

a one-shot story (or DC's 'Sandman'), the change in setting allows his beautiful imagination to shine out.

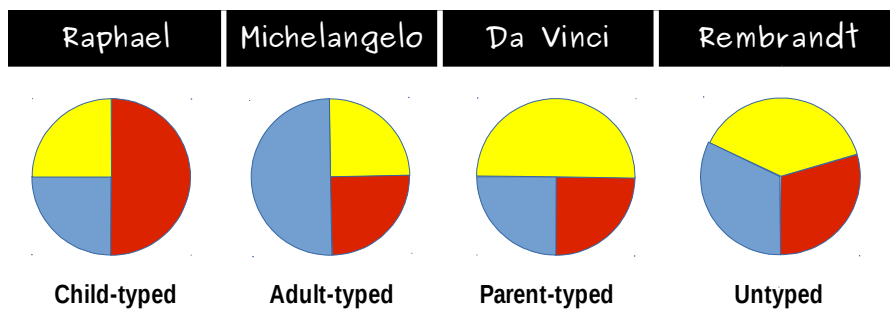
Going back to poor old Don Heck, whom I gave such a hard time to earlier, as an adult I can see now that his problem was much less an issue of rendering and much more an issue with style. He's not the prettiest artist, but he's far from being alone in that. He is a misfit, perhaps.

Looking back now upon, for instance, those early issues of Iron Man and the Avengers under Stan Lee, Heck would often draw figures tilted forward or leaning back, for some reason. This means something in the language of comics – of Kirby and Ditko - but I don't know what because it seems it was just part of Heck's style, it had no relation to his story. There was, for me, a friction – a cognitive dissonance – in Heck's artwork that was similar to the cognitive dissonance of reading the lack of entertainment for me in the Beano comics – except that I think it was anything but deliberate, with Heck. I think he himself didn't know how to apply his style to the story, or couldn't.

For this reason, I'd single out Heck as the Parent type in a group of his peers. Whether conscious or subconscious, he was a victim of his own style in a different way to either Robbins or Everett.



I think now you'll be unsurprised by my classifications, except that I am cheating a bit, with Miller, as I will with Rembrandt. (As Rembrandt is from a different era in time to the other three, so Miller is from an era thirty or forty years later than the others).



Whereas my other examples are from the Renaissance, Rembrandt is from the era of the Dutch Grand Masters at the height of the mastery of portrait painting but close to its end.

THE PLOTTING AND STORY OF COMICS

I don't collect comics. Like many comics fans, I wistfully recall owning many, many comics which nowadays fetch astronomic prices. But as I was being moving around by work, I had no place to store in bulk for a long time. Initially the supply of comics in the UK was extremely limited and we fans would look longingly and enviously at the boxed yellow ads between the story pages saying “00,000s of 2nd hand comics – send sae for list!”.

I didn't have the buy/sell mentality to engage in collecting seriously, but even more than that I wasn't so much sentimental as curious. What was it about these comics? When I was eighteen I cut up the pages of my most precious possessions at the time to make an essay for my HND, because they said it could be on any subject. It is an essay that is long lost now, probably for the best.

I lost the comics but I never lost the curiosity and although I never felt I had the budget to buy them, gradually I found that low-cost reprints and the library provided enough reading opportunity for me to remain informed and keep affection alive. Later on, as prices and trading stabilised, you could buy 'reading copies' which were too worn or damaged for a collector, at low prices too. This turned out to be particularly fortuitous for my essay in the case of Nick Fury which for some reason has never had the benefit of reprints.

But I get ahead of myself. I've said that the Fantastic Four represented a radical reinvention of comics on the literary level, compared with the monster and mystery titles of the 50's, but of course superhero comics started in the Forties with the invention of Superman, Batman and the Timely comics, Captain America (among others). This was the Golden Age of comics, and we can see immediately a sub-split within the genre as well as the split between genres. Thus, as adventure comics appealed to the Adult in the reader, whereas mystery comics appealed to his Child, so Superman's 'Action' comics promised to appeal to the same Adult, where Batman's Detective Comics offered a more playful appeal to the Child within.

Where Captain America, as an action strip had appealed to the same audience as Superman, it was Spiderman rather than the FF that would go up against Batman, and Spiderman that would most clearly come to represent Stan Lee's literate approach to the medium. Where the Fantastic Four was a pretty 'square' take on the family, with the reader identifying most closely with the Patriarchal Reed Richards, the Webslinger was a far looser creation – loose enough to live in the real world with girlfriend problems, money problems and most of all the 'fitting in' problems that you probably also had, at your school. In the first thirty issues, Stan Lee's magnificent experiment is complete: he has created the archetypal superhero story as literature. He has consigned Superman to the pre-pubescent world not too far off the Beano.

ARCHETYPE	
ADULT	CHILD
SUPERMAN	BATMAN
CAPTAIN AMERICA	SPIDER-MAN

People loved Spider-Man because they saw themselves reflected in the ordinary college student, Peter Parker. Just as the Beano had traded on your reading yourself into 'bad kid' Dennis the Menace, so the best comics would offer you a version of yourself on a larger than life scale. And throughout the sixties the best comics were created by Marvel.

The family of the Fantastic Four would become part of a much larger set of Marvel heroes, offering the young boy the chance to relate himself to the protagonist whatever his situation. Over the next few years, not just Dr Strange but Thor, the X-Men, Hulk, Iron Man and many more would make their entry into the literate stage Stan Lee was casting. By 1965, the players were fully assembled, and the play that would run for the rest of the decade would create in the minds of many young boys a love that they would carry for the rest of their lives.

Lee, Kirby and their co-creators had talked of what was being created underneath them and had wondered if these were the New Gods. It may be more instructive to see them as family members, so Spiderman is the clever son archetype, where the Hulk is the strongest son, writ large. Captain America is the eldest son with responsibility, where DareDevil is the youngest, with the duty to play. What of Thor and Iron Man then? The pair represent a different split, being both unremarkably placed (as middle sons, perhaps). One has a good secret – he is from Asgard, a very

special home – the other has a bad secret – a bad heart, although he comes from a good place too (he is rich).

Does such a reading offer more insight than comes from a purely psychological reading? In other words let us also look at Marvel's creation through the lens of Parent/Adult/Child, as we have started to do, to see if that satisfies our urge to understand just what was achieved more fully.

As before, I want to recognise the archetype. So I'll be looking for the permutations which can be created by the different possible combinations of the three components that make up every possible human being. I have talked of 'casting' a 'set' of characters, so can we see a pattern that is complete? What does this tell us about the characterisation? Most of all, do we see our analytical efforts justified by the rewards of understanding?

Alongside the science fiction and magic titles that the ever-prolific and economic Marvel produced were war titles, romance titles and western titles that would have been familiar to any comics fan of the fifties. These are all outside my remit as being both less available to read and less interesting in subject to me (even though produced by Stan and Jack). In addition, Marvel produced what I would call non-literate titles like Ant-Man (which I have read since) and Sub-Mariner. These I rightly or wrongly class alongside their DC pre-teen equivalents of Superman and Batman. On top of that, Marvel re-used characters from the earlier era, which had included Captain America, the Sub Mariner and a Human Torch (as seen in the FF).

But in August 1965 it took one of those war titles, "Sgt Fury and His Howling Commandos" and reinvented the Sergeant as Colonel and commander in chief of SHIELD, a futuristic version of the CIA. The original Sergeant's character had successfully represented the archetypal Parent-type. Sitting between the Captain/Man heroic and the Doctor romantic, the Sergeant had to be larger-than-life, combining the thankless roles of father and mother to his disparate company so, with this promotion to a similar position, the new pantheon, as I see it, was complete.

We could take the FF, Spiderman and Captain America as the P-type, C-Type and A-Type lineup of an initial PAC breakdown, and as we have observed the experiment was an immediate success with all three titles becoming both artistically and commercially established by 1965, but let us not jump straight to the conclusion too quickly.

Even before Spiderman, Lee had introduced a variant of the Frankenstein myth in the form of Steve Ditko's Hulk, a dull-witted but super-strong green giant, in May 1962. Not initially successful – his comic was cancelled after the first six issues – he and Ditko's Spiderman, who would also see a delay from his first issue, were preceded by the immediate success of another Kirby co-creation, the Mighty Thor. To start out with, we then have:

Name	Type
Thor	A
Spiderman	P
Hulk	C

In this setting it is Spiderman who represents the Parent archetype (how to be, for a teenager) yet in the later setting the same personality we want to give the same personality the C role. How do we reconcile this?

Well, the lineup is not complete, for we are missing Ditko's Dr Strange who didn't come along til July 1963. Before that, in March 1963 came Iron Man, in March, and finally, Captain America was resuscitated from the fifties in March 1964, prior to Nick Fury's placing in 1965.

We now have the mature lineup:

Name	Type
Thor	A
Spiderman	P
Hulk	C
Iron Man	?
Dr Strange	?
Captain America	?
Nick Fury	?
DareDevil	?

Is it complete? Well, let me assign the types so that we can test the result. Here we are looking not at the single measure, of A/C/P but at two measures combined. Is the set of possible combinations – the permutations – fully populated?

Name	Type
Thor	AC
Spiderman	?
Hulk	CP
Iron Man	CA
Dr Strange	PC
Captain America	AP
Nick Fury	PA
DareDevil	?

Thus, from the simple 2:1:1 ratio split (P, A, C) we drop down to a more sophisticated 2:2:1 ratio with the larger group, whereby two components are listed for each personality, and this gives us six permutations instead of three.

In which case, what drops out immediately to me as a fan is that Spiderman is actually the hidden PAC-type, after all.

That is, when closely considering the archetypes of Parent (Authority), Adult (Hero) and Child (Romantic), we may often tend to overlook the fourth type: the well-rounded, evenly-balanced – even, at extremes, saintly! – PAC type.

Lee and Ditko have created an independent, self-sufficient loner and that is confirmed by his exclusion from any team. He's not a C-type; he's always self-possessed and knows exactly what he's doing; he's more than just a P-type. That's what makes the moral awakening of Peter Parker so believable - and how different to, say, Batman's creation story.

So Peter Parker was bitten by a spider and Uncle Ben dies. As a film fan you've seen so many versions of this origin story that you'll be bored by it. As a comics fan, there's only one version, and that is the Ditko version. Unforgettably, Spider-man realises that *he could have stopped the killer*. And this matters so much because a few panels earlier we saw a Spiderman so self-possessed as to ignore the penny-ante thief far below his notice.

“If only I had stopped him when I could have! But I didn’t – and now, Uncle Ben is dead...” Compare this to the Batman origin story in the comics. There's no real difference in the films, where Batman's parents get killed and so he becomes a vigilante. We all would, is the message. But the comics are catering to a different type of reader and presenting a more considered story. In the comics, there has become an implication that Batman was traumatised by the killing in some way

even he doesn't fully understand. To give the stories a weight they lacked throughout the sixties, Batman has been pushed into a darker world, not necessarily a bad thing, as we saw with Neal Adams best work: the apparently dark Batman sheds a light which wholly eclipses the apparently light (but actually darker) Joker.

Daredevil is an odd fit alongside the other heroes. As a fan, I only have the briefest memories of him from my childhood. His stories were even less available than those of the others. I bought some later issues when I was younger, atmospherically illustrated by Gene Colan at the time, but I only caught up with the earlier issues through the cheap Marvel's Essentials reprint series.

I was interested to read these unknown examples from Stan Lee's greatest years, but they come across now as an odd batch. DareDevil has no great powers and uncomfortably mixes science fiction with more mystical story lines. There's a nice exploration of how to be brave (by not being scared) to be had, I think, but it gets less likeable when his twin turns up as a masquerade by himself. His character exploration from frustrated love-crossed victim to schizoid dual personality is dramatic but not world-shaking. I wonder if DareDevil was an attempt by Lee independent of Ditko (with Gene Colan) to explore the same PAC all-rounder type as was so successful in Spiderman.

In each case, throughout the action and the melodrama, an underlying character would successfully drive the story, as we can see below:

Name	Character Type	Story Archetype
Thor	AC ADULT-CHILD-parent	Bravery
Hulk	CP CHILD-PARENT-adult	Homelessness
Iron Man	CA CHILD-ADULT-parent	Buddy (Alcohol)
Dr Strange	PC CHILD-PARENT-adult	Mystery
Captain America	AP ADULT-PARENT-child	Bravery
Nick Fury	PA PARENT-ADULT-child	Spy/Cop
Spiderman	PAC	Experimental
DareDevil	PAC	Experimental

There is still no Marvel Essentials collecting the early Nick Fury stories, as I mentioned. I am fortunate to have bought a few of the Strange Tales run before he got his own magazine. Here it is very apparent that Stan Lee is considering Fury as a super-spy in the sixties 'James Bond' gadgets and action mould. He doesn't have Bond's 00 licence – he's not ruthless, and this is still the sixties – but he also doesn't have the girlfriend problems that were as necessary as radiation to the Marvel mythos of the Sixties.

You have a secret identity and are in constant peril so how can you declare your feelings for your pretty secretary/nurse/colleague? She would be constantly at risk the moment your enemies find out. Not only that but you have a weak heart/are lame/blind/ugly or your family would never approve. You don't get the girl – and you still have to face down the super villain; even though it means certain doom... these were stories!

The characterisation had to be strong enough to be recognisable but also strong enough to endure over long exposure. Not all of Marvel's comics set the bench so high. Ant-Man and Sub Mariner were DC titles published by Marvel. Not even experimental, I'm excluding these purely for our convenience. But in the majority of the cases, for the ten years of the silver age, to dare was to succeed. It was a time of giants.

Lee and Kirby invented a brand new mythos of the Norse Gods, and gave it independent life. Not just in Kirby's endless invention, nor in Lee's infinite Universe-building – there was even a long-running Tales of Asgard back-up strip, but in the invisible magic of the sixties there was success. So, from the rough early drafts of Loki to his final, polished realisation we see someone recognisably the same who has become wholly recognisable. And the wider story, as developed by Lee, is of Thor's

privilege against Loki's cunning. Thor is naturally brave, honest and trusting. Loki is resentful, cunning and evil – but is he so bad? When Thor is always the favoured eldest son and golden child of privilege, it is not so black and white, and the continued story also spans the complete decade.

In truth, Iron Man is much like Thor. You might think him an AC initially. Of course, he has the privilege of great wealth. But from his earliest adventures Iron Man has and needs the help of friends, where Thor has friends but you do not feel he needs them. Iron Man's best early stories include an extended cast of characters like best friend and 'ordinary joe' Happy Hogan. Later on, Lee will create the wonderfully pompous Jasper Sitwell to counterpoint the down-to-Earth characterisation of first then Nick Fury, then later Tony Stark's Errol Flynn – style likeability.

Later on still, other writers will take the exploration even further as 'playboy' Tony Stark, slips Iron Man into alcoholism, the archetypal disorder of the Child. Sometimes, writers did extend the characterisation beyond that Lee's Marvel had achieved, most notably in the X-Men. Apart from the exception of the Neal Adams/Denny O Neill run (which created instances to rank right alongside FF #38 and SpiderMan #31 in greatness), it is generally recognised that Chris Claremont found the heart of the soap-opera to sustain the best-selling post-Lee Marvel comic. Later on still, Frank Miller's DareDevil took the PAC character into the noir-ish world of the Private Eye with complete success. It was a success that would lead to even greater heights as Miller established himself the creative, literary and artistic equivalent of Lee/Kirby – perhaps the only one so far - with the admittedly all too brief Sin City series. But Sin City is almost as much a great film as a great comic, and Lee's Marvel is still the sole creator of the modern comic, and the sole exemplar of its potential, for our purposes.

It is that potential which fascinates me here, and particularly that potential which remains unexplored. I'm keen to get onto Cap, but I'll start with the Hulk.

Any good comic superhero needs three things: a super-power; an origination story; and an arch-villain. It is remarkable to me how good the creators were at thinking up villains to match their heroes. As Dr Doom proved a perfect match from the start for the Fantastic Four, so the Leader was instantly the perfect menace for the Hulk. The super-intelligent green-skinned Leader would always outwit, outplan and defeat the dim-witted green-skinned Hulk; but the angrier the Hulk gets the stronger he gets. There is simply no response to that: the Hulk can never really lose.

The Hulk, like Frankenstein or Jekyll and Hyde, was a fine piece of science fiction. From the meek scientist made monster by radiation, the extended storyline that Lee developed took us on an epic journey through a fundamentally science-fiction landscape. As momentum builds, one story leads on from another, just as Kirby was achieving with the Fantastic four. So, one Hulk story ends with him plummeting into the sea, and the next begins with him surfacing from it. The extended journey of the homeless and fundamentally tragic Hulk is an extended tour-de-force of adventure writing. At one point Lee takes the Hulk to Asgard, home of Thor. It's not a typical science fiction setting but Lee sets the tone of the issue by telling the story through a narrator, wholly in rhyme. It is a measure of his skill as well as his confidence that the result is like the Hulk himself: muscular.

Figure 14 *The Hulk*



What would it really look like, if one were strong enough to lift a castle?



Poetry, as far from 'fey' as you can get.

That issue is illustrated by Marie Severin who had done such magnificent work on Dr Strange after Ditko left. Marie Severin and Herb Trimpe are the key artistic co-creators of Lee's sixties Hulk, and it is Marie Severin's illustration of the poor embattled Hulk lifting a castle by one corner which stands out so in my memory. On a diet of seeing Superman rescue a ship by picking it up, this illustration with its mammoth effort, through crumbling rock, stood out at least at the time as a triumph of imaginative realisation. Not to be eclipsed, Lee's writing of the Hulk found time to include two outside enemies for him, in the Sandman (Spiderman's villain) and the Mandarin (Iron Man's arch-enemy). When the vindictive Mandarin pushes Sandman into a white-hot smelting vat, it leads to one of the great moments of pure audacity in comics writing and drawing, in the realisation of the Sandman's fate.

Later on, under other writers of equivalent invention the Hulk would himself be made super-intelligent. In a wonderful attempt to retain the innocence of the age, it was later theorized that the Hulk had never killed anyone despite all his destructive strength because the brilliant scientists brain beneath the clouded surface had actually been enhanced, and was subliminally calculating trajectories and paths so as to knowingly avoid injury.

Unfortunately, in the wider medium of comics death was still coming. Even such innocence as this could not fend it off indefinitely, as we'll see.

Experimentation didn't always succeed and for us in hindsight the failures become now of no less interest than the successes. Hence it is fascinating to see Lee's experimentation with Fury as the Bond-like super-spy because it is quickly over. Fury's characterisation as a Sergeant is what Lee retains, and as the Leader of Shield he continues to cut a larger-than-life figure, motivating people while barking orders at them. It is similar to a PAC characterisation but ultimately I think, more true to the Parent-dominant personality type. Later on, under Steranko and in his own mag, Marvel's Fury

will again become the Bond-like super-spy-hero, but this time as a combination of Bond and M, not as a vigilante-stroke-assassin under licence.

Lastly, in this lightning review, we turn to Captain America.

If Spiderman and DareDevil were literately experimental, then I think one of the most intriguing experiments which did not get fully explored was with Captain America. As the Marvel magic was to give each character an emotional problem to counterweight their gift of power, Lee's instinct early on was to make Captain America's problem a struggle against depression.

In his own magazine and even more in the Avengers, Captain America is a natural leader. He is also a man out of time and, as the title implies, a man with responsibilities. Since he mostly does not have a girlfriend, this is a recipe for a man whose life has few rewards. Since leadership is often lonely without the self-understanding of the PAC type, this would have been difficult writing but in richly unplumbed territory.

In the Avengers we see Lee drawn to this. The Avengers is a gang not a family, and so there is rivalry for the leadership in this less cosy world. Specifically, the underworked Hawkeye is naturally envious of the overworked Captain, leading to a very believable friction adding to the story dynamics of these early adventures. The thought bubble is invaluable here for revealing to us what is going on under the surface as well as what we see and hear (metaphorically).

The dynamic of the straight-arrow Captain versus the good-at-heart bowslinger is initially eclipsed by Hawkeye's understanding of Captain America's lonely responsibilities, especially as Hawkeye does have a girlfriend. It doesn't take much imagination on our part to see what could have been. At least, it doesn't take me much imagining to think that this could have been the moment that comics broke through the teenage barrier to become a truly adult medium. It doesn't happen. Where the Thing has genuine cause for depression and his stoic mindset is revealed in thought never in speech, if Cap's problems could have been those of a real adult, they are not developed through either option. Lee will very soon leave the Avengers which will be written by less adventurous talent. Kirby will drive forward on the solo strip while Lee's creative hopes will become vested in a brand new character about to get his own comic, the Silver Surfer.

As history tells it, Lee's hope was to create a messianic figure in the story of Galactus' herald stranded on Earth but the magazine was not to be successful, not even as a heroic failure this time. Comics would remain a teenage medium to the end and the end was nearly here. As it should nearly be here for this overlong article of mine. And we are getting to the end, but before we do, can I mention the characterisation as applied to teams?

We've already seen the success of the Fantastic Four, and mentioned the Avengers and the X-Men. We can see the opportunity for character exploration by a gifted creator best perhaps by comparison with an SF success in the field of TV.

In the original Star Trek we saw an archetypal PAC-configuration of characters. Thus we have Spock as the archetypal A against McCoy as the C and the Captain as the P-type. This represents one opportunity as was fully realised on TV. (So much so that we prove our recognition by identifying Scotty as the 'missing' or overlooked PAC-type.)

The Fantastic Four represent an equivalent fully-realised exploration of character, with The Thing as the C-type, against Johnny Storm's A type, and Reed Richard's P type. The much underrated Susan Storm is recognised as the PAC-type in this set.

Star Trek the Next Generation represents a rather different archetypal configuration. Here we have the Captain really as a PAC-type rather than a P-type. The interest comes from the other PAC-types around him: this is not character-driven, but instead allows character to be story-driven, which is arguably easier to write. What creates the interest in analysis and with hindsight is the character of Data, as a character-study of an A-type in a PAC-type context. Without getting sidetracked by that analysis here, what creates the interest in the Avengers, as a gang with a PAC-type leader is the same: how does an A-type develop in this PAC-type context.

Once again Stan Lee's creative instincts were on the button. It was his initiative to create a new character for the team, and it was his determination that the character should be an Android: the Vision.

Unfortunately, Lee did not write the stories but only plotted them. His writer actually wanted a non-android Vision initially. He did not see the same potential as Lee for the Spock/Data-like idea of an 'emotionless adult'. Although the Vision was a very popular creation, and did indeed pursue the Pinocchio-like story line of 'wanting to be human', it wasn't the phenomena that first Spock and then Data would become, as the centre of their respective worlds.

At last then it is time to close. In hindsight and in summary, what we see in the Marvel comics of the Sixties is the medium of sequential art – comics - used to fully explore in a child-like but not child-ish way, the world of the teenager. From 1961, a teenage boy reading the comics could identify with a different family than his own, in the FF. By 1963, he could identify himself as smart (Spiderman), brave (Thor) or strong (Hulk). By 1965, he could identify his role model as James Bond (Fury), Indiana Jones (Dr Strange) or Superman (Iron Man), and inhabit the extended family built around them. He could relate to himself in a teenage gang (Avengers) or in a school class (X-Men). If he did so choose, as we've seen, he would be embarking on a literate character-driven journey, with each archetype being explored as a genuinely original prototype, within the PAC distribution as seen elsewhere.

It is this conjunction of originality and completeness that gives recognition to a unique artistic genius recognisable as the 'Marvel Universe'.

Individual	Creation Date	Archetype
Hulk	May-62	'Frankenstein'
Spiderman	Aug-62	Himself/Nerd
Thor	Aug-62	'Odysseus'
Iron Man	Mar-63	Cop
Nick Fury	May-63	Sergeant
Dr Strange	Jul-63	'Indiana Jones'
Captain America	Mar-64	Cop
DareDevil	Apr-64	Geek
Nick Fury	Aug-65	'J Bond'
Group		
Fantastic Four	Nov-61	Family
X-Men	Sep-63	Class
Avengers	Sep-63	Gang
Outside		
Ant-Man		
Sub-Mariner		
Rawhide Kid		
Silver Surfer		

What happened after the Silver Age?

My curiosity has been satisfied around Lee's writing through reading the Marvel Essentials series which has filled in almost all my gaps. I confess though that I have not put the teenage medium aside as a grown man really should have done, perhaps. I've not had to buy comics for a long while. To my amazement the library started to stock graphic novels and, over the years, this historical subsection – never all of them; never the most recent – proved eventually to offer up almost everything that I had heard of, or heard tell, as important and interesting.

As a UK fan of US comics growing up, with friends that didn't happen to be like-minded, there was no community around fandom. In the Seventies, cheap fanzines started to be published in the UK at just the right time for me. Nowadays, podcasts provide a similar sense of connection. But with the sixties rapidly receding, and the seventies confirming my connection to the previous era, there was little before the Marvel Essentials black-and-whites to draw me back in. I lost contact with the Marvel line of comics as the scuttlebutt seemed to be about DC, with Sandman; Image, with Spiderman's Todd McFarlane creating Spawn; and Dark Horse's Sin City; not to mention the challenge of the Hernandez bros. 'Love and Rockets'.

There was rewarding gold to be found here, albeit different to the earlier rewards. Sin City by Frank Miller was the most obvious success. The astonishing brutalist artwork with its meta-verse of window-blinds and exaggerated violence was story-telling in the best style. It seemed to me also a genuine development of noir. Where Hammet, James M Cain and the great pulp writers like Hank Janson had established the archetype, Miller's story, first of the ultimate femme fatale, Eva, in 'A Dame to Kill For', then later the doomed tragedy of Marv who knows he is going to die long before we do: "I throw up a couple of times... then I'm ready." didn't break the archetype but established a completely fresh prototype within it. Marv in particular propels his own story. Starting off stocky he becomes bigger and blockier by the frame, echoing the coming-into-focus that Kirby had brought to Loki in the Thor comics.

A different development in Love and Rockets came from a different sensibility. Where the graphic I cut out that most reproduced Sin City for me was a story-telling device of Dwight lost against the framed lips of Eva, in the former it was the sight of Penny in a bathing sight that took one's breath away with its sheer beauty.

Figure 15 Fantagraphics and Dark Horse (Non-Marvel) Comics Publishers



'Love and Rockets' beauty



'Sin City' style

The story in *Love and Rockets* was gentler and more meandering, a different appeal to the plot-heavy invention of my favourite works – until you read the story of Luba, whose husband falls on evil times, eventually perishing whilst walking, ill and starving, by the sea. He and Luba have split up long before, their rocky relationship having fully run its course, yet his last thought is represented by a thought bubble: picture, not text, of he and Luba happily enjoying a simple evening as a couple. That insight into the man's deepest wishes and beliefs is represented graphically not verbally, a rare if not unique story-telling moment in comics. Kirby actually did something similar when presenting the origin of the Absorbing Man in *Thor*. He not only describes imprisoned thug Crusher Creel's ambitions in words, but chooses to illustrate them in pictures within the thought bubbles of the character. Actually seeing Crusher Creel wearing a crown as ruler of the world brings home the fantastic nature of the dream and makes Creel oddly pitiful, more than dangerous.

Similar as these comics might have appeared to the Marvel Universe, there was a categorical and fundamental difference, as represented by death. Neither heroes nor villains actually killed anyone in early superheroes comics. The most valuable legacy of the sixties, and Stan Lee's greatest achievement, was to create this modern, moral world, where Death was most noticeable by his absence.

Without Death this was not truly an Adult world – it was truly a teenage world, at least for as long as it was better than the Adult world. The drive forward had even created 'political' plotlines in the late sixties: drug addiction and overpopulation in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (for DC) even resulting in the Comics Code Authority withdrawing its seal of approval. The sixties ended still without death.

Unfortunately, Marvel's lead character of Spiderman languished somewhat in the seventies. He couldn't stay at college forever, and Lee had early on seen the wisdom of the journalist's identity for Peter Parker, freelance photographer. In the seventies, Lee would continue to write his favourite character, but with his ambition sated, he'd be happy to just repeat his formula in the newspaper strips he produced. In hindsight from what I have read, it seems to me that Spiderman slowly slid into the role of unofficial policeman. Unable to do much more than cruise the city looking for trouble, his villains start to become those the police cannot catch.

Of course people die in these comics. Death had existed in theory since Spiderman's origin. Uncle Ben had been killed, but 'in theory' is a good way to put it – there was no funeral, no mourning. No writer to my knowledge felt the need to explore/explain further. People really don't die as a result of the hero's actions, or his powers. I'm told that Spiderman's first love, Gwen Stacy was killed in the early seventies. I understand there was a repeat of the moral ambiguity about Uncle Ben as well, but for me it is largely in theory. I'm not aware of any change in Spiderman or his world as a direct result. But the gradual slide in role continues and it is in 1985 that Spiderman finds death impinging on his world in a way which is distinctly unchild-like and distinctly cop-like, as a serial killer kills Captain Jean De Wolf.

Comics have always explored both the world of wonder and the world of horror. With the British inspired *Watchmen* in 1986 and the coming *Sandman*, beginning in 1989, both from DC, we were entering a downswing in the cycle with the most visually striking and literate comics being dark rather than light. I was happy to be on the margins.

I still couldn't buy second hand comics at a knock down price from a collection of 000,000's as those old yellow boxed adverts had so magically offered, but I had realised I could buy some of the most classic sixties comics as reading copies at a surprisingly affordable price, from the blossoming Internet. It wouldn't be long before the first *Marvel Essentials* titles appeared in the mid nineties. At that point it really did become practical to read retroactively and so fill in the gaps in my appreciation. Throughout the 2000's I had less contact with mainstream comics than ever, whilst Marvel and DC went through some of their most momentous changes in art and literature since the classic days of the Bullpen.

It was in this period that I have come to think that Marvel transitioned from its post-seventies, so-called 'bronze age' or modern era to the current post-modern era. From the outsider's point of view there has been explosive, ever-faster development: a snowballing of deaths and 'Events' which has made it difficult to catch up, if not provided diminishing returns in doing so.

In film, from the advent of 'Easy Rider', 'Star Wars' and 'Jaws' there was a similar change between 'old' Hollywood and 'new' Hollywood. I love the old films. For me, the best period ever for cinema was the decade between 1935 and 1945. Yet I did not rue the change in film as a loss of innocence or the degradation of the medium. In hindsight, it seemed to me, the geeks had taken over from the ancients. The new and the old could happily exist side-by-side. Was it the same story in comics? It's a question I ask myself, and have been asking here.

First, to explain, an Event simply means that regular running titles such as we've been discussing all fall under and become related to an overall story arc. Such a story arc might return to normal, for example an invasion is repelled by all, or it might reflect an official change of direction, such as the death of Captain America. From the fans' point of view, the most important event, and the most important change, is 'Civil War'. Dare I say, it was a storyline that immediately made sense to anyone who had ever read superhero comics? The death of children as a side effect of heroes actions finally causes the government to introduce a registration act for superheroes. It will mean that all heroes must register with the government and be licensed to act on its behalf.

Essentially, the entry of death into the comics world in a real-world way; that is, the death of innocents, as a side-effect if not a cause of heroes; had a real-world result, and the American Government introduces the Super-Hero Registration Act. This will split the world of the heroes into those who support registration and those who see it as an infringement of individual freedom.

You could even see this in sociological terms: any group of real people (i.e. having a Parent-Child-Adult mindset) will divide into a Parent-Child (PC) minded subset on the one hand and a Parent-Adult (PA) minded subset on the other. I have not read the storyline for myself so I can't say more. I could read much more, as it is one of the longest and widest story-arcs. But it does not sound like the geeks taking over to me, it sounds like the money taking over.

What of the art? We know that the technology of comics printing has been revolutionised in a way that is unrecognisable, and nothing but good for the latter-day Rembrandts working in the industry. From Alex Roth to Frank Quitely (some wonderful names in comics!) Comics are every bit an artistic and visual feast for the beauty-starved eye as they have ever been.

They are, however, different. The old dramatic story-telling of a Kirby or a Ditko has become far more cinematic, very often with imaginary people being replaced by photo-based action which obviously reflects the poses of actual people. A modern story like 'Winter Soldier' the recent Captain America film, owes much more to the lighting and pacing of film than to the longstanding mood and composition techniques reflected in sixties comics. Most significant of all, I think, the thought bubble seems to have become actively discouraged. Just one example: there is a scene in the original comic book 'Winter Soldier' of a character sitting engaged, in thought, between two active scenes (See Figure 13 Bottom Illustration). It is presented with no narration and no exposition. Even though this comic was written years before the film, like far too many of them, it seems to aspire to comic-as-storyboard illustration.

I loved the old comics, like the old films, for their moral clarity. It was a place to go where one's deepest values could be affirmed and renewed. I'd unhesitatingly go backward rather than forward in my seeking of that, if old comics were a better source than new. I'd even start reading old DC comics in preference to the new ones, if so. It is something I could do. An artist/creator like Alex Roth reflects no divide between DC and Marvel; he can do the same work happily in either camp.

We seem to see in modern comics the effects of a takeover not by the geeks but by the Corporations. It seems that rather than an artistic drive, as a takeover by geeks would appear, there is a drive by and toward 'big money'. The Civil War event will soon be reflected in the increasing

superhero films being made. The hope on the other side must be that more and more complexity may be introduced to allow more and more consumption by the mass market.

I began this essay asking how an adult should relate to superheroes. When I seek to read Alex Ross' work for DC as an adult, what I see are a series of Parental archetypes, whose difference is primarily exterior, not character-driven interior. The difference between the members of Justice League is primarily one of bright colour, to appeal not so much to one's inner child, as one's early child. Even the most basic PA/PC split is hardly there. For a child say, this is the doctor/teacher split (or Ma/Pa or brother/sister) as in Ditko's Dr Strange and Kirby's - not "Teacher America" but "Captain America". There's no such split between Flash and Green Arrow, or between Wonder Woman and Aquaman. The character-driven appeal to both adult and child has to be found elsewhere. Most super-hero films seem to me the same.

But Hollywood still does Hollywood better than anyone. It still creates what is uniquely a super-hero film, and not a comic. Will Smith's film 'Hancock' was the example for me. For some reason, I saw in this film an answer to the question I am now asking.

The American Western explored male pride in a world of individuals, an appropriate paradigm for the uncertain future ahead of us in the fifties and sixties. In the seventies with the overwhelming political success of the right worldwide, a different paradigm pertains. Is it, I wonder, the paradigm of big money? Is it the case that what interests we adults in the superhero on film is their metaphorical ability to, or possibility of, reflecting the ultimate accident that we all imagine for ourselves; the impossible accident of becoming super-rich?

In every comic published by Marvel and DC the hero is deserving, as they must so be to fight evil. In 'Hancock' the hero is irresponsible, at least in the first half of the film and is only redeemed by the wiser man speaking 'truth to power'. Whilst it may be a flimsy premise, it illustrates the fundamental problem that film has with comics: the problem is not the likelihood or otherwise of super-powers themselves. As long as the story has character – whether good or bad – it is filmable.

We have an inbuilt sense of fairness that corresponds exactly to the moral clarity which most appeals to us externally. We believe, ultimately and always, in a fair world. We believe that if we deserve to be rich, we will be. If film can show us how we could in advance, or at worst, how we could have been, then the most immersive, successful – both artistically and financially - medium of all, may remain just so.

Even with superhero films.