

## "For a Jungian Turn in Comics Studies"

The rise of the new field of comics studies offers the opportunity to reconsider theoretical choices made by earlier forms of media studies. When, in an earlier generation, film studies began looking for models of subjectivity, it turned to the Freudian/Lacanian tradition. Left behind, for the most part, was the very different psychoanalytic perspective developed by Freud's onetime protégé Carl Jung. While parsing the obsessions of exemplary filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock seemed to require the Oedipal framework of Freud, the work of comparable comic book auteurs such as Alan Moore and Neal Gaiman is in a very different, much more Jungian register. Their model for the psyche begins not with the family romance, but with a multiplicity of intense affects and impulses represented by godlike figures of outsized powers and desires. As these creators recognize, comic books' heroes are archetypal, their stories mythic, their metaphysics mystical. Turning to Jung gives comics studies access to an invaluable trove of insight into the mythic dimensions of popular culture. In turn, recentring media studies around comics studies offers a chance to reintegrate models of archetype and the numinous into contemporary cultural studies.

Fans and scholars rightly insist that comics are more than just superheroes. But this claim for diversity also includes a hint of disavowal: there's good reason why superpowered characters have featured so prominently not only in the medium's most popular works, but also in many of its most powerful and influential ones. Produced by just ink and paper, comics are not indexically bound as photography and film are, and so easily transcend the limits of verisimilitude, making them the ideal visual medium for fantasy. Only now are other media, using CGI technology, able to approach the vastness of this canvas. Even Joss Whedon's film version of *The Avengers*, working with a budget north of \$100 million, was compelled to save money and effort by setting much of its second act in the stagey confines of the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier. The locations of a comic book, on the other hand, are limited only by the artists' imaginations.

Comics, then, are ideally suited for representing larger-than-life characteristics in settings far beyond the everyday. In Jungian terms, superheroes are archetypes: representations of primal psychic forces. In Jungian interpretations of myths and fairy tales, individual characters represent archetypal aspects of a single psyche: the Hero, the Mother, the Shadow, and so on. Likewise, stories of superheroes and super villains speak to us today because their characters represent archetypal elements within each of our psyches. Within *The Avengers*, for example, one might argue that Thor is an image of power, Captain America of duty, Iron Man intellect, and the Bruce Banner/The Hulk the dialectic of repression and aggression. Each of us contains within us the multitudes of the superheroic mythos.

Critics of Jungian interpretation have argued that it is essentialist—that is presumes all cultural texts represent unchanging psychological truths. But contemporary "post-Jungian" critics have pointed to the distinction that Jung draws between "archetype" and "archetypal image." An archetype is an unrepresentable pattern of energy, stored, for Jung, in the collective unconscious. An archetypal image is the specific embodiment of an archetype in a distinct cultural and historical moment. The archetypal image is where archetype meets ideology. Bringing Jung together with the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, we can see every specific archetypal image as an intervention in the struggle to define the hegemonic meanings attached to an underlying archetype. The representation of Captain America, for instance, has been a space to struggle over the meanings of patriotism—from Jack Kirby's Avenger slugging Hitler, to Alan Moore's curdled parody the Comedian, to Whedon's man out of time. Pairing post-Marxist ideology criticism with post-Jungian analytical theory gives comics studies the tools not just to explain its own medium, but also to map the fantasies and fears at the heart of contemporary popular culture.