Patron Saints of Destruction

- Violence, Spirituality and the Posthuman in Superhero Comics

In this seminar, I will present some of the key aspects of my Ph.D. project through a case study of two recent comic book series by the American writer Tom King.

Superhero Comics storytelling – and the storytelling of its neighboring media such as popular science fiction, fantasy and video games – is profoundly preoccupied with violence.

Some of this is due to genre traditions, reader expectations and, according to its harshest critics, perhaps even the juvenile, masculine escapist tendencies of the medium. I argue that while these tendencies should not be overlooked, the prevalence of violence is actually what ties these stories of superhumans to "real" human experience. Just as violence is a major part of myth and folklore because these genres, too, are about the tragedies of life such as suffering, death and defeat, superhero storytelling conventions offer refuge to stories that insist on the presence of suffering and evil in the world.

One of the most interesting recent examples of Tom King's "Omega Men" and "The Vision". In "The Vision", the narrator remembers how the android The Vision almost caused the destruction of the world in his attempt to create a "normal", yet entirely non- or posthuman, android family in a D.C. suburb, and the way these artificial intelligence deals with the very human trauma of modern life. In "Omega Men", the superhero "White Lantern" gets caught up in a terrorist insurgency against an oppressive galactic empire as he struggles with his sympathy for both sides and the potential of his superpowers to tip the scales of the war.

As I will demonstrate, both stories peek into a posthuman future of androids and aliens, but do so without leaving behind two of the strongest forces in human experience: The trauma and power of violence on one side, and the search for meaning and enchantment through spirituality as a response to trauma on the other.

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