

A History of Politics in Superheroes

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Graphic Design

M4X01560

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Words = 1640

“A History of Politics in Superhero Comics” is a curation of excerpts from comic books in the superhero genre showcasing specifically political moments in the genre from across the years. It was created as a response to the idea that superhero comics should steer clear of real-world politics and issues and stick to being entertainment. This curation will show that in fact the superhero genre has always been a place to discuss and dissect political and social issues and will continue to do so as long as the genre continues.

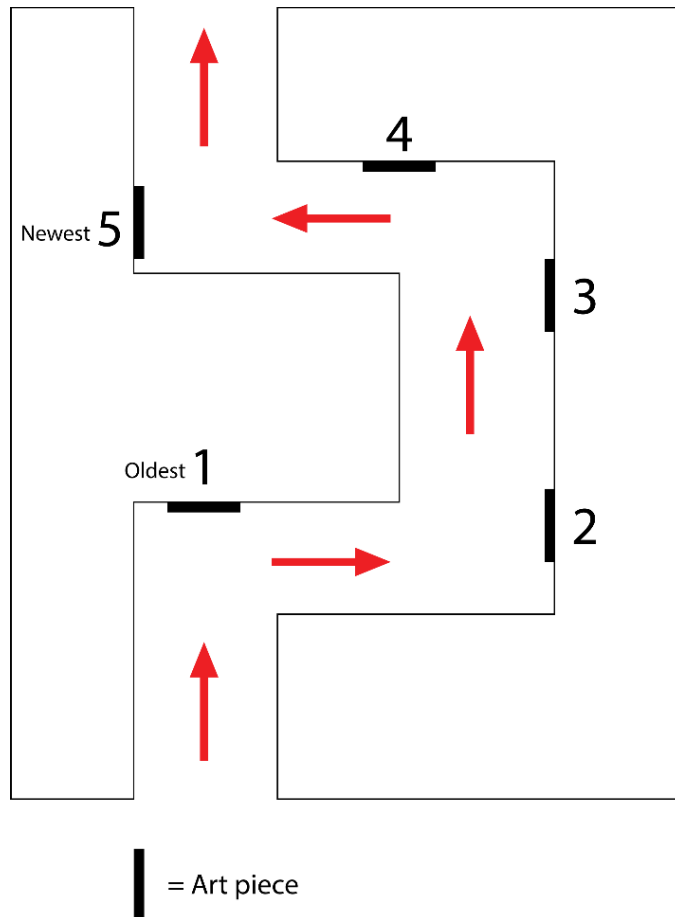


Figure 1. Exhibition Floor Plan (Sykes 2020)

The exhibition has been chosen to be presented in the Michael Rosenfeld gallery in New York. The choice to hold the exhibition here was due to the Michael Rosenfeld gallery hosting previous exhibitions with similar hopes of promoting equality and representation in areas of the art world and also due to it's proximity to superhero comics legend Stan Lee's birth place. Stan Lee is responsible for a lot of political messages behind many well-known heroes and stories, because of that this felt like an appropriate place to show some of the work and messages he helped create and share. The layout of the actual exhibition is set out in chronological order through a one way system, this is to show progression throughout the years in the superhero genre to allow viewers to clearly see and compare the early pieces to the later pieces.



Figure 2. Cover of Capitan America #1 1941 (Kirby and Simon, 1941)

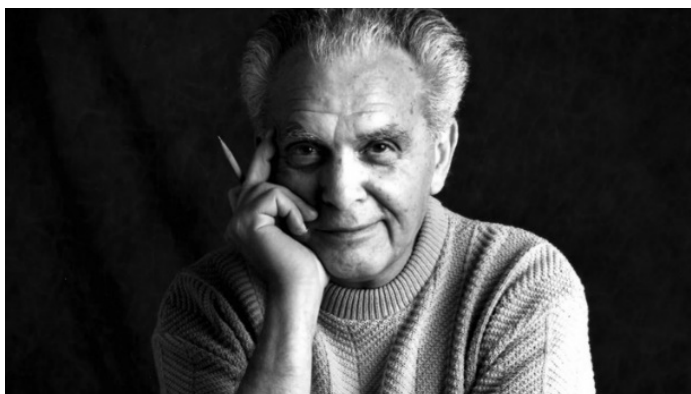


Figure 3. Jack Kirby, Artist of Captain America #1



Figure 4. Joe Simon, Author of Captain America #1

The first piece in this Curation is the cover of the first Captain America comic. The cover drawn by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby is one of the earliest outright “political” pieces of official superhero art. It shows that from the onset Superhero comics have had a grounding in politics as it depicts Captain America (who is representational of the United States) punching Hitler (who is representational of Germany) as a form of pro US propaganda essentially depicting the US defeating Germany in World War 2. At the time of Captain America’s conception the US hadn’t yet entered into the war and neither of the character’s Jewish born creators were willing to ignore the horrific actions of the Nazis, Captain America was their way of pushing towards the US joining the fight against the Axis powers in Europe. It was decided that this would be the first piece seen in the exhibition because it is the oldest piece in the exhibit being originally drawn in 1941



Figure 5. Excerpt from Green Lantern #76 1970 (Adams and O Neil, 1970)



Figure 6. Dennis O Neil, Author of Green Lantern #76

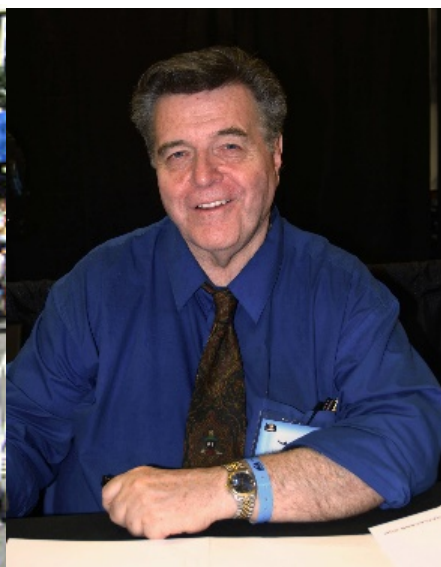


Figure 7. Neal Adams, Artist of Green Lantern #76

This piece is an excerpt from the 1970 comic Green Lantern #76, written by Dennis O'Neil and illustrated by Neal Adams. It depicts the protagonist Green Lantern being approached by an older Black man and being questioned about why the hero is willing to protect alien's from all over the galaxy but unwilling to stand up for Black people living in his home country. This excerpt is one of the early examples of comics changing from more accepted messages such as "the Nazi's are bad" to more nuanced ones, what appears now as a ham-fisted way to talk about racial injustices was at the time a very progressive and bold statement and showed the comics world that this medium could be used to discuss more nuanced topics beyond the obvious. The impact of this comic on the superhero genre can still be felt today, it was one of the first to push the boundaries of what could be discussed.

in these stories and inspired many other writers and artists to attempt it themselves (not always with the same success as O Neil and Adams however) and it is because of this impact that this excerpt is being displayed in this exhibition.



Figure 8. Cover of Green Lantern #85 1971 (Adams and O Neil, 1971)

This next piece is in the same comic series as the previous. Once again written by Dennis O Neil and Drawn by Neal Adams this cover of 1971's Green Lantern #85 depicts both heroes Green Lantern and Green Arrow discovering the latter's sidekick and ward Speedy's drug addiction problems. The story ends with the mentor and sidekick reconciling and Speedy stating "Drugs are a symptom... and you... like the rest of society attack the symptom not the disease.". On the outside this cover appears to demonise the sidekick as was common at the time presenting the story in a way that made it seem that they would be toting the line of hard anti-drug mentalities. But the story itself paints a different picture, it goes out of it's way to portray Speedy not as evil or uncaring for society but rather the opposite "We wanted to show that addiction was not limited to 'bad' or 'misguided' kids." (Titans Tower Library, 2020) stated O Neil when questioned about why Speedy was chosen for this story. Showing drug use in this light was treading new ground for the superhero genre, previously whenever drug users were present in the story they were often criminals or portrayed as lazy good for nothings. Having the sidekick of a lead protagonist be the one the story was focused around

allowed the creative team to explore and dissect a problem in American society without demonising the victims of said problem or making the story less relevant by having a one off character be the focus. This story went on to be a stepping stone for other writers and artists to explore similar problems in fair and non-judgmental ways and it is because of that influence that it is an important piece to show in this gallery.



Figure 9. Excerpt from Ms Marvel #13 2016 (Andolfo and Willow Wilson, 2016)



Figure 10. G Willow Wilson Author of Ms Marvel #13

Figure 11. Mirka Andolfo Artist of Ms Marvel #13

One of the newer pieces in this curation, this excerpt from 2016's Ms Marvel #13 depicts Muslim hero Kamala Kahn AKA Ms Marvel and one of her friends advocating for people to use their electoral votes to make the changes they want to see in America. This excerpt (written by Kamala Kahn's creator G. Willow Wilson and illustrated by Mirka Andolfo) was chosen for this curation for two reasons, firstly it's use of a Female Muslim protagonist waving an American flag is a powerful image for representation as there aren't many positive examples of Muslim people in pop culture. "What would the world look like if they didn't have to be the bad guys?" stated Wilson in an interview with the New Yorker (Tolentino, 2020) Secondly it shows a pro-democracy stance urging people to go out

and use their right as voter to push for changes in society, it's once again an example of superhero comics using their platform and medium to try to influence people's views on politics as a whole.



Figure 12. Excerpt from Punisher #13 2019 (Kurdranski and Rosenberg, 2019)



Figure 13. Matt Rosenberg Author of Punisher #13 Figure 14. Szymon Kurdranski Artist of Punisher #13

The final piece in this curation of comic excerpts is from writer Matthew Rosenberg and artist Szymon Kurdranski's 2019 comic Punisher #13. It depicts the vigilante hero known as the Punisher tearing up a sticker featuring his iconography after removing it from a police vehicle, the Punisher then expresses his displeasure in the two police officers idolising him stating that they should be upholding the law and not dispensing the street justice that he undertakes. This excerpt is a far more recent piece and is a response to the trend of police officers throughout America adopting Punisher iconography as an accessory to display on their uniforms or equipment outright stating that the Punisher is not the ideal form of law enforcement and police officers shouldn't be allowed to use whatever force they feel to deal with criminals. Creator of the Punisher Gerry Conway agrees with

this sentiment stating in an interview with SyFy Wire “To me, it's disturbing whenever I see authority figures embracing Punisher iconography because the Punisher represents a failure of the Justice system.” (Forsythe, 2020) This was chosen to be the last piece of the curation that viewers will interact with because it is the most recent piece displayed and it illustrates the evolution of political messaging in the superhero genre of comic books by comparing it to the oldest excerpt that the viewer will see first.

This curation explores a timeline of political moments in the superhero genre ranging from early pieces to more modern ones. The earliest piece being Captain America #1 existing as a push for the US to enter World War 2 and to condemn the actions of the Nazis. The next two excerpts (both from the 1970s Green Lantern series) came from the same creative team and the same time period and broke ground by exploring issues relevant to their time such as racial discrimination and the war on drugs in America. More recent items include the excerpts from Ms Marvel #13 and Punisher #13 respectively. These discuss issues at the forefront of modern society such as Islamophobia and how that has affected positive Muslim representation in popular culture, and the acceptance of vigilante justice in the American police system. All these pieces demonstrate that the superhero genre is and always has been intrinsically linked to political and social issues affecting society and disproves the idea that the politicisation of superhero media is a recent trend that needs to be stopped. These pieces in fact say the opposite; these explorations and parallels to society make for a more compelling narrative and help to normalise discussion of issues that can be hard for people to inspect beyond the surface level. The authors and creators of these characters and stories that have been referenced in this essay have all held the opinion that the superhero is a place for these issues to be discussed and to remove that would be to remove depth from the storytelling process.

This essay shows that the superhero genre not only has a history of exploring complicated issues but they are intrinsically linked to narrative and creation process of these stories. To remove that would be to not only remove an aspect that makes these characters relatable and more realistic despite their godlike powers but to remove potential role models for the younger audience who may feel a lack of representation in popular culture as a whole.

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Figure 13. Unknown, (n.d). *Matthew Rosenberg*. [image] Available at:
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Figure 14. Unknown, (n.d). *Szymon Kudranski*. [image] Available at:
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