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"THE END WILL BE THE OVER-MAN": UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC ROMANCE AND GRAPHIC NOVEL

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List of Abbreviations

The following is a list of the abbreviations used in this work.

AC   *Action Comics* stories in Jerry Siegel, and Joe Shuster. 2016. *The Golden Age Superman*. Burbank, CA: DC Comics.

DC   *Detective Comics* stories in Bob Kane, Bill Finger, Gardner Fox, Whitney Ellsworth, Sheldon Moldoff, Jerry Robinson, and George Roussos. 2016. *The Golden Age Batman*. Burbank, CA: DC Comics.

DF   The Original Writer, Garry Leach, and Alan Davis. 2014. *Miracleman - Book One: A Dream of Flying*. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.

DKR   Miller, Frank. (1986) 2002. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. New York: DC Comics.

FA   Wells, Herbert George. 1906. *The Future in America*. New York, NY; London: Harper & Brothers.

FG   Wells, Herbert George. (1904) 1906. *The Food of the Gods and How It Came to Earth*. London: Macmillan & Co.

IDM   Wells, Herbert George. (1896) 2005. *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. London: Penguin Books.

IM   Wells, Herbert George. (1897) 2012. *The Invisible Man*. London: Penguin.

LEG   Moore, Alan, and Kevin O'Neill. 2000. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Volume 1*. New York: DC Comics.

LEGv2   Moore, Alan, and Kevin O'Neill. 2003. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Volume 2*. New York: Vertigo/DC Comics.

MU   Wells, Herbert George. (1905) 2005. *A Modern Utopia*. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books.

RKS   The Original Writer, Chuck Austen, John Ridgeway, Alan Davis, and Rick Veitch. 2014. *Miracleman - Book Two: The Red King Syndrome*. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.

RS   Siegel, Jerry, and Joe Shuster. (1933) 1983. 'The Reign of the Superman'. *Nemo* 2.

SDC   Wells, Herbert George. (1899) 1900. *A Story of the Days to Come*. In *Tales of Space and Time*. London, New York: Harper & Brothers.

SM   *Superman* stories in Jerry Siegel, and Joe Shuster. 2016. *The Golden Age Superman*. Burbank, CA: DC Comics.

sWWs   Wells, Herbert George. (1897) 1978. *The War of the Worlds*. In *The Collector's Book of Science Fiction by H.G. Wells with the Original Illustrations*, 3–103. Secaucus, N.J: Castle Books.

TM   Wells, Herbert George. (1895) 2005. *The Time Machine*. Penguin Classics. London, England ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Books.

VfV   Moore, Alan, and David Lloyd. (1990) 2005. *V for Vendetta*. New York: Vertigo/DC Comics.

WSW   Wells, Herbert George. (1899) 1978. *When the Sleeper Wakes*. In *The Collector's Book of Science Fiction by H.G. Wells with the Original Illustrations*, 361–477. Secaucus, N.J: Castle Books.

WWs   Wells, Herbert George. (1898) 2005. *The War of the Worlds*. Penguin Classics. London, England ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Books.

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Questa tesi è dedicate a voi.

Introduction

This thesis aims at analysing the influence of Herbert George Wells's (1866-1946) scientific romances on the birth and development of Anglo-American superhero comics. It considers the way in which certain ideas and motifs developed by the British writer – most notably superhumanity, utopianism, and modernity – were explored in 1930s American comic books, only to be subsequently appropriated and deconstructed in Alan Moore's (1953-) 1980s graphic novels. One of the most celebrated British graphic novelists of all time, Moore approached the superhero as an archetypal myth of American culture, reframing it within a subversive tradition of imaginative fiction.

My point here is that Wells's direct and indirect influence on early American superhero comics contributed to produce a twofold ambivalence about modernity and utopianism. Due to narrative and political reasons, these contradictory configurations remained latent throughout most of the twentieth century, as comics were being discursively produced as juvenile and potentially harmful entertainment. Superheroes' structural ambiguities resurfaced in the early 1980s, when literary sophistication, deconstructionism, and the graphic novel's self-containedness provided the basis for a radical reconceptualization of the archetype. Moore's revisionary comics employ the superhero to negotiate the antinomies of utopianism and anti-utopianism, exploring in an innovative manner the conflict of utopia and dystopia. At the same time, these postmodern texts become a site of cultural hybridization, which challenges the "Great Divide" between high art and popular culture (see Huyssen 1986). Through an intertextual decategorization of literature, art, and comics, the graphic novel opens to new, experimental possibilities.

The triangle of Wells's scientific romances, 1930s superhero comics, and 1980s graphic novels suggests significant modalities in which cultural and historical discontinuities are represented in popular culture. Wells wrote his speculative fiction between the decline of the Victorian era and the rise of urban, cultural and aesthetic modernism on both sides of the Atlantic. In this sense, he "bridged the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both literally and symbolically" (Evans 2009, 20). Superhero comics were created in 1938, when the first *Superman* story inaugurated the genre and popularized the comic book form. Their birth is thus situated in the transitional years between the Great Depression, which undermined the optimism

of America's cultural modernism, and the Second World War, when Nazi Germany irremediably tainted the reputation of the superman idea. Lastly, 1980s graphic novels repositioned the character's inherent modernity within postmodernity, problematizing the *ethos* and the ideologic assumption of superheroes *vis-à-vis* the end of metanarratives (see Lyotard [1979] 1984). It is worth noting that this historical and cultural inbetweenness is also reflected in the composite nature of the genres and media here considered. Forerunner to science fiction, the scientific romance was created in the late nineteenth century as a hybrid between the discourses of (popular) science and narrative fiction (Pagetti 1980, 124–26; Vallorani 1996a, 19–21). Comics customarily employ a combination of words and images. A graphic novel is, to put it simple, a self-contained comic in novel form.

Even though Wells's fiction has had a significant impact on American literature and popular culture, his influence on comics and graphic novels is still critically understudied. Scholars have mostly focused on Wells's relationship with pulp fiction (Ashley 2000; Mendlesohn 2009) and cinema (D. G. Smith 2002; Vallorani 2005; K. Williams 2007). However, few studies concentrate on his capacity to anticipate motifs and concerns that would become central in early American popular culture (see for instance Andrae 1980; Coogan 2006, 129–33). Even fewer works investigate the re-appropriation of Wellsian romances and utopias in contemporary Anglo-American graphic novels (for instance Baxter 2009 and Thoss 2015, who specifically discuss the re-use of *The War of the Worlds* in Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*). Thus, this study should be seen as a pioneering attempt to chart Wells's narrative, aesthetic, and cultural impact on American comics, and in particular on the birth and development of the superhero genre. From a different standpoint, my work sets out to examine the way in which these cultural artefacts have participated in the tradition of utopian and dystopian fiction. Throughout the twentieth century, Anglo-American comics have effectively used the superhero as an instrument to scrutinize the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions of Western utopianism.

Another aim of this work is to delineate a methodology for the critical and historical analysis of the relationship between literature and comics. I agree with Charles Hatfield's claim that "the heterogeneous nature of comics means that, in practice, comics study has to be at the intersection of various disciplines (art, literature, communications, etc.)" (2010, 2). The methodological framework here adopted mirrors the hybridity of the comics medium, combining in a multidisciplinary perspective literary studies and theoretical tools from comics

studies and cultural studies. In particular, I capitalize on cultural studies' status as "multi- or post-disciplinary field which blurs the boundaries between itself and other 'subjects'" (Barker 2003, 5; see also Vallorani 2016, 31–32). As Sardar and Van Loon point out, "Cultural studies functions by borrowing freely from social science disciplines and all branches of humanities and the arts" (2013, 7). I hence eclectically appropriate theoretical tools from literary critics and theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), John Cawelti (1976) and Darko Suvin (1979); cultural critics as Walter Benjamin (1979, 2008), Umberto Eco (1972), Raymond Williams (1977), Linda Hutcheon (1988, 1989), and Fredric Jameson (1991); comics historians, semioticians, and critics like Roger Sabin (1993), Thierry Groensteen ([1997] 2007), Benoît Peeters ([1998] 2007) and Geoff Klock (2002).

This work is divided into three chapters. The first begins by introducing Moore's contemporary graphic novel series *The League of the Extraordinary Gentlemen* (serialized since 1999) as an influence-laden, highly intertextual work which retrospectively establishes significant links between superhero comics and Wells's early scientific romances. The rest of the chapter is devoted to the analysis of these romances. I take into account *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (serialized 1897, vol. ed. 1898), and *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) to investigate the way in which these works lay the foundations for comics' subsequent exploration of the conflicted relationship between superhumanity and utopianism. I argue that these romances draw on Charles Darwin's theories – often mediated by the work of Thomas Huxley – and on the scientific *episteme* of the time to problematize the possible outcome(s) of the evolutionary process. Both in his fiction and his scientific journalism, Wells rejects the Victorian belief in "Excelsior biology" (Herbert George Wells [1891b] 1975, 159), i.e. the idea that "'evolution' will continue with increasing velocity under the supervision of its extreme expression – man" (158). In Wells's early works, the formulation of superhumanity is ambiguously underpinned by the notion of posthumanity on the one hand, and by a deanthropizing mechanism on the other. In other words, his novels dramatize the hope of evolving into a superior being, and at the same time the fear of zoomorphic/xenomorphic retrogression. Sections four to six look at the dialectical interplay of these two discourses in Wells's first four scientific romances, which depict the superhuman as a dystopian and/or apocalyptic agent. I also examine how these texts borrow the colonial imagery from Victorian imperialist fiction to convey the fear of sub-human regression, and how they stage the anxiety of modernity at the very turn of the century. The last

section specifically considers *When the Sleeper Wakes* (in its original, serialized edition) as a significant precursor to the whole superhero genre. The romance is a transitional work, which ties up the theoretical and epistemological strands of the previous texts while signalling Wells's growing interest in sociology and utopianism. To an extent, it subverts the paradigm established by the previous novels, as it depicts the *übermensch* as a possibile eutopian agent. Exploring the text's problematic relationship with the utopian genre, I thus scrutinize its ambiguous depiction of technology and superhumanity. I conclude the section by comparing *When the Sleeper Wakes* with Wells's 1906 travelogue *The Future in America*, in order to demonstrate that the former text articulates an Americanized view of the future.

The second chapter is devoted to the appropriation and re-use of Wells's romances in early twentieth-century American popular culture. The goal is to show that his works and ideas percolated through different strata of American literature, and ultimately influenced the birth of superhero comics in the late 1930s. The first section discusses the significance of Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* (1926) for the popularization of Wells's early fiction, and for the creation of a network of sci-fi enthusiasts known as 'fandom'. I then attempt to determine the reasons of Wells's success in the US by considering the way in which themes developed by the British writer resonate with the American culture of the time. In particular, I give a brief overview of the importance of utopianism in America's history since the early stages of British colonization. I also examine the centrality of the superman idea in nineteenth-century dime novels and twentieth-century pulp fiction. The following section analyses three American works of fiction that, in different manners, draw on Wells's scientific romances and anticipate superhero comics. These works are Upton Sinclair's novelette *The Overman* (1907), which reformulates ideas from *The Island of Doctor Moreau* to explore the mystical facet of superhumanity; Philip Wylie's *Gladiator* (1930), clearly indebted to Wells's *The Food of the Gods* and most remembered for its alleged influence Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Superman* comic book; Siegel and Shuster's illustrated short story 'The Reign of the Super-Man' (1933), the earliest prototype for the eponymous comics character, published in the their own mimeographed fanzine *Science Fiction: The Advance Guard of Future Civilization*. The chapter's last sections take into account superhero comics as a composite medium and a genre, to probe their ambivalent relationship with modernity and utopianism. The comics medium is investigated with reference to the emergence of aesthetic and cultural modernisms, and Bürger's ([1974] 1984) and Huyssen's (1986) analytical categories are employed to ascertain

the connections between comics and the historical avant-gardes. I then move to the early tales of *Superman* (1938) and *Batman* (1939, created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger), the series that have established superhero comics' generic formulas. Considering approximately the first year of publication of each comic book, I put forward that these archetypal characters reinstate the Wellsian dialectic of posthumanity and deanthropization. I then move to the problematic representation of technology and proactive utopianism. Here, Eco's essay "The Myth of the Superman" (1972) is key to understanding the narrative reasons which impede the articulation of proper utopianism in open-ended superhero comics. The political reasons are addressed at the end of the chapter, which concludes with a concise investigation of the great comics scare of the 1950s, and the subsequent institutionalization of the Comics Code Authority as a form at self-censorship.

The third chapter focuses on the way in which the structural ambiguities of early American comics come to the fore in Alan Moore's 1980s postmodern graphic novels. Drawing on their Wellsian predecessors, *Miracleman* (also known as *Marvelman*, 1982–89), *V for Vendetta* (1982–89), and *Watchmen* (1986–87) explode the archetypal contradictions through the symbolic conflict of utopia and dystopia. At the same time, these texts use the superhero figure to negotiate the historical and philosophical antinomies of utopianism and anti-utopianism. The opening section provides an overview of the formal, generic, and cultural conditions that have permitted a subversive reconceptualization of superhero comics. I thus take into account three closely related aspects: a) the emergence, in the latter half of the twentieth century, of the graphic novel as a self-contained comics narrative; b) the 1980s development of the "revisionary superhero narrative" (Klock 2002, 3), i.e. a superhero comics that adheres to and simultaneously disavows the genre's formulaic patterns; c) the so-called 'British Invasion', namely a whole generation of English, Scottish and Northern Irish authors who, since the early 1980s, have crossed the Atlantic and revolutionized American mainstream comics. The following sections offer a close reading of Moore's graphic novels. The first takes into account *Miracleman*, a subversive revision of a 1950s British comics series called *Marvelman* (itself a clone of the 1940s American character Captain Marvel). The text resituates the character in a realist, contemporary scenario to deconstruct the genre's ideological assumptions. Reimagining the superhero as a postmodern construct, *Miracleman* explores and simultaneously critiques its inherent utopianism. *V for Vendetta* is a critical dystopia that extrapolates a post-apocalyptic, nightmarish future from Thatcher-era Britain. Drawn by David Lloyd, it is regarded as Moore's

most explicit political statement. The graphic novel appropriates narrative elements from the British dystopian tradition – most notably Wells, Huxley and Orwell – to narrate the feats of a super-powered anarcho-terrorist against a fascist regime. The last section analyses *Watchmen*, illustrated by David Gibbons. A hybrid of 'whodunit' crime story and science fiction, it is set in an alternate-history version of 1980s United States in which masked avengers are commonplace, and the two world superpowers are on the verge of a nuclear war. I compare the graphic novel to Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* for its sophisticated investigation of the philosophical and material implications of superhuman utopianism. I also consider the way in which *Watchmen* articulates the conflict of utopia and anti-utopia as a clash of different narratives.

With cultural and literary studies as methodological frameworks, this work lies at the intersection of Wellsian criticism, science fiction and utopian studies, and studies on comics/graphic novels. The secondary sources thus reflect this constitutive heterogeneity. My analysis of Wells's scientific romances stems from critics who, throughout the twentieth century, have scrutinized his influence on dystopian fiction and/or the relationship with the late-Victorian scientific thought. One of the earliest studies is Mark Hillegas's *The Future as Nightmare* (1967). In this seminal text, the author argues that "many of the central as well as peripheral images in the anti-utopias were first generated in Wells's early scientific romances, chiefly those written in the 1890s" (5). Therefore, "the great anti-utopias are both continuations of the imagination of H. G. Wells and reaction against that imagination" (*ibid.*). Hillegas then goes on analysing Wells's impact on works like E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). It is worth noting that Hillegas still uses 'dystopia' and 'anti-utopia' interchangeably. The current distinction was suggested, almost a decade later, by Lyman Tower Sargent in "Utopia – The Problem of Definition" (1975). Here, anti-utopia and dystopia are identified as different textual and philosophical positions, with the former term denoting "works, both fictionally and expository, which are against Utopia and the utopian thought" (1975, 138; quoted in Moylan 2000a, 62). In the following years, Sargent repeatedly refined his taxonomy (1994, 2001), which now stands as the theoretical basis of numerous works on utopianism and utopian science fiction, including the present.

Four works can be said to exemplify the approaches of 1970s Wellsian criticism. Jack Williamson's *H. G. Wells: Critic of Progress* (1973) systematizes Wells's *oeuvre* and explores

the conflict between "pessimism" and "optimism" (33). Edited by Robert Philmus and David Hughes, *H. G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction* (1975a) collects and comments upon Wells's scientific journalism to establish connections with his scientific romances. The essays in *H. G. Wells: a Collection of Critical Essays* (1976a), edited by Bernard Bergonzi, look at Wells's relationship with "the intellectual matrix of the *fin de siècle*" (Bergonzi 1976b, 6), while assessing the literary value of his apocalyptic visions. Darko Suvin's ground-breaking *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) is mostly remembered for his formulation of "cognitive estrangement" and the "*novum*". Nonetheless, Suvin's contribution provides in-depth analysis of Wells, whom he sees as "the Turning Point of the SF Tradition" (208). He also takes into account the utopian novel, which he claims "is not a genre but the *socio-political subgenre of science fiction* (61, emphasis in the original).

The critical literature of the 1980s variously stemmed from the theoretical breakthroughs of the previous decade. Developing on the previous "Thinking by Opposition: The 'Two-World Structure in H.G. Wells's Short Fiction" (1981), John Huntington's "Utopian and Anti-Utopian Logic: H.G. Wells and his Successors" (1982) offers some important insights into Wells's influence on dystopian fiction. As Moylan argues, the paper "served as useful bridge between the earlier anti-utopian studies and the new critical paradigm that Sargent's definition helped to establish" (2000, 128). Considering the difference between "anti-utopia" and "utopia-dystopia", Huntington analyses *When the Sleeper Wakes* as an ambiguous text which "marks the point of intersection of the two genera" (1982, 125). The distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia is disregarded in Krishan Kumar's *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987), an otherwise exhaustive work which discusses the historical development of the utopian genre. Kumar sees utopia and anti-utopia as "antithetical yet interdependent. […] But the relationship is not symmetrical or equal. The anti-utopia is formed by utopia, and feeds parasitically on it" (100). In addition to the thorough examination of Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (168–223), the significance of Kumar's book for the purposes of my study lies in its scrutiny of utopianism as foundational element of American culture (69–98; the topic is also discussed in Segal 2012).

Since the 1990s, we have assisted to a further diversification of Wellsian criticism. Patrick Parrinder's *Shadows of the Future* (1995) explores Wells's fiction from a variety of standpoints, like his interest in futurology and sociology (18–33), and his ideas about British imperialism (65–79, see also Cantor and Hufnagel 2006). Nicoletta Vallorani's *Utopia di mezzo* (1996) traces the influence of the nineteenth-century scientific *episteme* on the scientific romance, and

analyses *When the Sleeper Wakes*'s conflicted relationship with the utopian genre. The essays in *The Reception of H.G. Wells in Europe* (2005), edited by Parrinder and Partington, ascertain Wells's impact on twentieth-century European culture. Maria Teresa Chialant's contribution (2005), for instance, takes into account Wells's lesser-known liaison with Italian Futurism and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Another work that offers new perspectives on the 'science' in Wells's scientific romances is *The Early Fiction of H. G. Well: Fantasies of Science* by Steven McLean (2009). Keith Williams's *H.G. Wells, Modernity and The Movies* (2007) concentrates on "Wells's response to, and investigation of, one of the shaping forces of modernity", i.e. cinema and "other forms of recording technologies" (1). In his brilliant reading of *When the Sleeper Wakes*, Williams points out that the novel's "method of narrating also frequently brought the 'frame-into-the-picture', not least in how Wells's dynamic visualisation of megalopolitan London transforms static 'scenography' into a cinematically stereoscopic space, with a constantly angled, refocused and obstructed viewpoint conditioned by the built environment" (82).

In addition to Wellsian criticism proper, I also draw on several studies that approach utopianism both as a philosophical and a literary category. Besides the aforementioned contributions by Sargent and Kumar, my work relies on Tom Moylan's *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000), which traces the development of the utopian genre and criticism throughout the twentieth century. Developing on his own conceptualization of critical utopia, Moylan provides a taxonomical systematization of utopian, anti-utopian, and dystopian narratives with reference to the science fiction genre. Some of the points raised in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* are further developed in the subsequent *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003a), co-edited by Moylan and Baccolini. Other contemporary collected volumes offering a range of critical perspective on the topic are *Utopianism/Literary Utopias and National Cultural Identities: A Comparative Perspective* (2001), edited by Paola Spinozzi, and *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (2010), edited by Gregory Claeys. Finally, a Marxist analysis of utopias and utopianism is provided in Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005). Discussing the genre's political implications, Jameson considers the utopian text as a "registering apparatus for detecting the feeblest positive signals from the past and the future and for bricolating and combining them and thereby producing what looks like a representational picture" (29).

Despite the relative marginality of the subject, in the last few years a considerable amount of literature has been published on comics, graphic novels, and superheroes. However, these studies often lack the rigour and accuracy required by academia. Hence, a careful selection is to be made, in order to avoid works that are uncritically apologetic and solely oriented towards enthusiasts. The first serious discussion of superhero comics emerged during the 1960s, when Umberto Eco published his seminal study on "The Myth of Superman". Translated in English in 1972, the paper famously describes the narrative structure of superhero comics as a paradoxical hybrid of mythical and romantic formulas (15). Prompted by Eco's conceptualization, Thomas Andrae's "From Menace to Messiah: The Prehistory of the Superman in Science Fiction Literature" (1980) critically reframes the archetype within the history of science fiction. Andrae first relates Siegel and Shuster's *Superman* to its literary predecessors, as Wells's *The Invisible Man*, Burroughs's *John Carter* and Wylie's *Gladiator*. He then analyses Superman as a transitional product of 1930s popular culture. The superhero is characterized by "an anti-established posture which transcends the revolutionary paranoia of the early thirties yet remains unassimilated to the statist ethic of the New Deal" (99). The critic rightfully observes that in the early issue Siegel's Superman was in fact "the champion of the underdog desplaying [*sic*] a sense of class consciousness virtually absent from later comic book stories" (98–99). Andrae's approach has been taken up by Peter Coogan, who in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006) exhaustively investigates the mythical, literary, and cultural sources that have informed the archetype. Coogan also provides a definition for the superhero, which he describes as

> A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic convention Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. (30)

Another critic who has inspected the superhero with reference to the Anglo-American culture of the late nineteenth-century-early twentieth century is Chris Gavaler. In "The Well-Born Superhero" (2014) he takes into account Emma Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, William Burroughs's *Tarzan*, Batman and Superman to argue that "The contemporary superhero

character type is in part a product of the British and American eugenics movements of the early twentieth century" (182). In "The Rise and Fall of Fascist Superpowers" (2016) he reads Siegel's Superman as a subversive, ethnically-connoted appropriation of the Nietzschean *übermensch* that was being glorified by Nazi Germany.

Roger Sabin's *Adult Comics* (1993) can be numbered among the significant contributions to comic studies that are not centred on the superhero genre. Besides providing a functional definition for the graphic novel (235–38), Sabin must be credited for his analysis of Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen*, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as the culmination of a significant but often neglected tradition of comics addressed to adult readers. The influence of underground comix on contemporary graphic novels lies also at the core of Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics* (2005). Hatfield's account is framed by his view of comics "not only as a crackling, vital repository of supercharged Pop Art but also, and crucially, as a literary form" (x). He sets out to investigate the formal specificity – the "Otherness" (32) – of comics reading, with the aim of unearthing the complex semiotical strategies developed by comics creators. The sensorial peculiarity of comics is similarly central to several essays collected in *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture, and Sequence* (2010a), edited by Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling. In particular, Jens Balzer draws on Walter Benjamin to discuss comics reading as an urban experience, in which the reader "must simultaneously process different views and stimulation to senses [..] and he must also move past or through the objects of his perception in order to be able to see them as a whole" (2010, 26). Jared Gardner's *Projections* (2012) springs from analogous considerations to probe the relationship between comics and aesthetic modernity. Defining comics as "perhaps the most understudied of the vernacular modernisms of the twentieth century" (28), he traces the shift from the anarchic and fragmentary self-containedness of late nineteenth-century strips towards the open-ended seriality of early twentieth-century comics.

A moderate but growing body of literature has focused on Alan Moore and his graphic novels. George Khoury's *The Extraordinary Works of Alan Moore* (2003) is a book-length interview in which the author details his problematic relationship with the mainstream American comics industry. Khoury has also authored *Kimota! The Miracleman Companion* (2001), in which he similarly interviews Alan Moore, Mick Anglo, Neil Gaiman and all the artists who have collaborated to the creation of the revisionary comics series. "Alan Moore and the Graphic Novel: Confronting the Fourth Dimension", by Mark Bernard and James Bucky

Carter, explores the influence of the historical avant-gardes as cubism and futurism on the temporality of Moore's comics. Gianluca Aicardi's *M for Moore* (2006) is a concise but exhaustive biobibliography that recounts Moore's long and multifarious career. Published in the same year, Sean Carney's "The Tides of History: Alan Moore's Historiographic Vision" (2006) takes into account *Miracleman*, *Swamp Thing*, *Watchmen* and other graphic novels to demonstrate that "Moore represents history as the contradiction between the two visions of history, one metaphysical, one material" (3). Annalisa Di Liddo's *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (2009) is arguably the most complete and the best researched study on the works of the British writer. Di Liddo gives prominence to Moore's lesser-known graphic novels to delve into the intertextual ramifications and the politically-charged articulation of Englishness. She also devotes a whole chapter to *Lost Girls*, a complex and sophisticated pornographic comic that has garnered mixed to negative reviews. A small amount of works has concentrated on Moore and Gibbon's *magnum opus*, *Watchmen*. Sara Van Ness's *Watchmen as Literature* (2010) and Andrew Hoberek's *Considering Watchmen* (2014) offer a thorough examination of the text's poetics and political strands. Another significant contribution is Peter Yoonsuk Paik's *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (2010), which foregrounds the ideological implications of *Watchmen*'s utopianism.

As can be inferred from this brief literary review, no book-length studies on Wells's influence on superhero comics and/or Moore's graphic novels have been published. I thus hope that my thesis will partially and tentatively fill the gap, contribute to the debate on Wells and popular culture, and possibly stimulate new research on this engaging topic.

1 Utopia, Superhumanity and Modernity in H.G. Wells's Early Scientific Romances

What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful?

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895)

None of your American wonders, this time.

H.G. Wells*, The Invisible Man* (1897)

1.1 An Extraordinary Gentleman

In 1999, British graphic novelist Alan Moore inaugurated a comics series entitled *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (hereinafter *LEG*).[1] Written by Moore and illustrated by Kevin O'Neill, the series is a sophisticated, neo-Victorian pastiche that incorporates several distinctive features of late nineteenth-(and successively twentieth-)century romance into the generic structure of superhero narrative. *LEG* narrates the exploits of a group of 'extraordinary' literary characters (and, incidentally, social outcasts) who are recruited by MI5 to protect the British Empire from internal and external threats. In the first two graphic novels, both set in 1898, the League's members are thus the well-known (to the reader) Mina Murray, Allan Quatermain, Hawley Griffin, Dr. Henry Jekyll/Edward Hyde and Captain Nemo, coordinated by a certain Campion Bond and supervised by the mysterious M., the chief of the Secret Services.[2]

Arguably conceived as a sort of '*fin-de-siècle* British Justice League', the *League* concept has evolved to produce a self-conscious, at times obscure intertextual mythology of popular (and less popular) literature (Chapman 2011, 247–49). The intricate narrative network

established through a series of references, indirect quotations (both visual and verbal), and stylistic imitation creates a cultural hyperreality in which new diegetic connections are retroactively established.[3] Therefore, not only does Mr Hyde fulfil the role of the same comic book character which inspired in 1962, the Hulk, but he is also hinted to be the "ape-like figure" (Moore and O'Neill 2000, 1x17) responsible for the death of the L'Espanaye women (as in Edgar Allan Poe's *Rue Morgue*) and of Anna Coupeau (the eponymous character of Émile Zola's *Nana*). To a certain extent, the graphic novel series is conceptually similar to Moore's earlier erotic extravaganza *Lost Girls* (Moore and Gebbie 2006), for both texts

> appropriate popular conceptions of Victorian identity and femininity, well-known literary characters (Captain Nemo, Mina Harker, Wendy Darling), language (the language of popular romance and the lavender prose of the sex-novel) and particular literary forms (sensation and Gothic novel) to parody conceptions of the socially conservative Victorian period. (Halsall 2015, 252)

However, the relationship between the *LEG* and the original Victorian (and post-Victorian) source texts goes beyond the mere playfulness of parody, as the authors "examine the ideologies of the source text even to the point of deconstructing them" (Chapman 2011, 247). This means that the graphic novel suggests alternate readings of the original works in order to explore the imperial obsessions of *fin-de-siècle* Britain, including the sexual, racial and psychological subtexts, and to seize the subversive possibilities of alterity. As Di Liddo claims, "it is in the marginalization of otherness caused by the Anglocentric, patriarchal vision of the Victorians that the contemporary author ironically locates the proliferation of the most fruitful, vibrant aspect of Victorian culture itself" (2009, 111).

In addition, *LEG* serves as a metacommentary on the development of its own medium and genre(s). The series proposes a genealogical reading of popular culture that, while debunking the highbrow-lowbrow dichotomy, reinstates comics within the Victorian tradition of visual and genre literature. Therefore, through explicit references and crossmedia contaminations, "penny dreadfuls, illustrated newspapers and flipbooks […] are made out to have been an integral part of the formation of comics and are thus accorded their place in the medium's tradition" (Thoss 2015, 5). To a degree, Moore and O'Neill translate into narrative form Sabin's historiographical account, according to which 'modern comics' developed in Britain after story papers and (especially) cartoon magazines like *Punch* or *Judy* – with *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* (first published in 1884) as "the first ever comic and the first adult comic"

(Sabin 1993, 17). Sabin also points out that British proto-comics replaced the declining penny dreadful as least respectable form of popular entertainment, and were even considered as a threat to literacy for the lower class (21–22). Therefore, *LEG* exploits its graphic novel status to question the high-low cultural boundary *via* self-referential, polysemic pastiche, while paying homage to those forms of popular literature which, similarly to the series' own characters, have been marginalized and excluded from the canon.

Of all the different literary and cultural references present in the first two *LEG* graphic novels, the British writer H.G. Wells is arguably the most relevant. Not only is the albino Doctor Griffin, i.e. *The Invisible Man* (published in 1897), a member of the league, but also the very inciting incident of both stories is distinctly Wellsian: in the first volume, the plot revolves around the heroes' quest for the stolen cavorite, the anti-gravity substance from *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), with professor Cavor even making a cameo appearance (Moore and O'Neill 2000, 2x22-23)[4]. The second story-arc (Moore and O'Neill 2003) is basically a retelling of Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (hereinafter *WWs*) (see Baxter 2009, 11–12), with a few deviations from the original plot. Moore in fact locates the prologue on Mars, where a war is being fought between a coalition of different Martian races and the tripods seen in Wells's novel, hence revealed to be alien invaders. As Moore remarks in an interview, "I thought all these races could have existed. H.G. Wells' Martians, they are not from Mars. They are from some other galaxy. And they tried to take over Mars but have been driven out by the combined Martian resistance." (Stone 2001).

To display this 'resistance', *LEGv2*'s prologue blends the source novel with other Wellsian and non-Wellsian Martian narratives. Therefore, *WWs'*s "octopuses" ([1898] 2005, 39) are depicted as fighting against E.R. Burroughs's John Carter,[5] or the Sorns described in C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* (1939).[6] Amongst the other things, the latter creatures are drawn to resemble the aliens brought by the tripods "as provisions from Mars", described as "bipeds with flimsy, silicious skeletons […] and feeble musculature, standing about six feet high and having round, erect heads, and large eyes in flinty sockets" (Herbert George Wells [1898] 2005, 126). Moore and O'Neil also include the 'crystal egg' from the eponymous short story, "one of Wells's most remarkable inventions" (Hammond 1979, 67), which in Moore's rewriting is confirmed as sharing the same diegetic universe of *WWs*. Thus, the novel's 'octopuses' are likely to be the "large-headed creatures […] hopping busily upon their hand-like tangle of tentacles" (Herbert George Wells [1897] 1900, 23) of the shorty story, in the same

way as the 'flimsy bipeds' used as rations might be the "clumsy bipeds, dimly suggestive of apes, white and partially translucent" (27).

In the graphic novel, after having being repelled by the Martian resistance, the vicious 'molluscs' land on the Earth, on the very same "common between Horsell, Ottershaw, and Woking" (Herbert George Wells [1898] 2005, 13), where they forthwith demonstrate the destructive power of the heath ray. Later on, the aliens are secretly approached by Griffin, the mischievous invisible man, who offers to collaborate: "You are going to rule the Earth next to me" (Moore and O'Neill 2003, 2x24). Afterwards, while the tripods are razing London, Mina Murray and Alain Quatermain travel to the South Downs to look for a secluded mystery scientist, in possession of the sole weapon capable of halting the invasion. The "Devil Doctor" (4x12) is revealed to be Dr. Moreau, who has survived the incident described in Wells's novel, and is employed by the government to create new hybrids.[7] Eventually, the treacherous Griffin is killed by Mr. Hyde, while the 'octopuses' are defeated through Moreau's most lethal creation, a hybrid between anthrax and streptococcus.

1.2 From the Graphic Novel to the Scientific Romance

The centrality of Wellsian characters and plot devices in the narrative structure of Moore's pastiche enables a twofold process of critical revision, concerning the aesthetic and cultural relationship between the scientific romance and the graphic novel. From a formal standpoint, *LEG* relies on three interconnected features of contemporary Anglo-American comics, i.e. serialization, intertextuality (see Bongco 2000, 90; Di Liddo 2009, 35–62), and the shared continuity in superhero narratives (see Jenkins 2009, 20–22; Cates 2012, 836–38).[8] These structural mechanisms may also be identified – in different modalities, and in a more or less embryonic form – in Wells's romances.

Virtually disappeared from prose fiction, pre-serialization nowadays only survives with comics, which are published in anthologies or 24-page booklets, and after few months reprinted in single paperback (or, more rarely, hardcover) volumes (Sabin 1993, 235). Nonetheless, magazine serialization was widespread in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when works by authors like H.G. Wells, Charles Dickens, and Herman Melville were released in sequential instalments, often illustrated, later to be collected in book form. It is interesting to

note that Wells sometimes chose to modify his novels for volume publication. For instance, the serialized edition of *WWs* (April-December 1897) lacks the whole encounter with the artilleryman, perhaps added in the volume "to have a mouthpiece who so starkly pronounced on the death of civilization" (Aldiss 2005). The editing for *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) was even more substantial – almost a full rewriting –, and the book was republished more than a decade later, in 1910, with the title of *The Sleeper Awakes.* As David Smith summarises, "By eliminating a weak love story and a great deal of unnecessary continuity in the original plot, Wells now made it a didactic work" (1986, 77).

In Wells's scientific romances, and even later utopias, the double ontology of the narrative form establishes a textual network with both fictional and non-fictional works. Explicit references to articles and essays constitute the scientific (or para-scientific) underpinning of Wells's early fiction, written in same years of his own pieces of 'science journalism'.[9] For example, at the very beginning of *WWs* the anonymous narrator cites an article – about the sighting of a mysterious light on Mars – published "in the issue of *Nature* dated August 2nd" (Herbert George Wells [1898] 2005, 9). Later on, he reports to have read a prophetic article about the evolution of human anatomy, written by "a certain speculative writer of quasi-scientific repute" (Herbert George Wells [1898] 2005, 127), who happens to be Wells himself.

On the other hand, the intertextual allusions to fictional works can be said to be variously determined by Wells's own formative readings, detailed in his *Experiments in Autobiography*: "I read such books as *Vathek* and *Rasselas*, I nibbled at Tom Paine, I devoured an unexpurgated *Gulliver's Travels* and I found Plato's *Republic*" (Herbert George Wells [1934] 1984, vol. 1, 137-8); "I read Shelley, Keats, Heine, Whitman, Lamb, Holmes, Stevenson, Hawthorne, and a number of popular novels" (305).[10] A specific subset of references employed by Wells include utopias and utopian narratives, whose presence not only demonstrate his "self-awareness in dealing with the utopian genre; they also test the author's capacity to renew these same conventions" (Porta 1997, 16). This is evident in Wells's own utopias, ideally constructed as antithesis to an established literary and philosophical tradition: "He points out the flaws of the classical utopias, correcting them in the blueprints for his own new state" (Williamson 1973, 122). In this sense, Wells's works partake in the dialectical intertextuality that Fredric Jameson identifies as distinctive feature of the utopian genre (2005, 2). An example of the utopian tradition against which Wells suggests a counterargument is Williams Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890). This pastoral utopia is explicitly mentioned, in a somehow patronizing manner,

in several works of Wells's, as *When the Sleeper Wakes* ([1899] 1978, 420) – where it serves as a hermeneutical model for the bewildered protagonist (Vallorani 1996a, 14) –, *A Modern Utopia* ([1905] 2005), and *Men Like Gods* ([1923] 1976, 197).

Besides the interplay between sources and narrative patterns, Wells's appropriations can also be seen as a pseudo-didactic attempt at popularizing the literary canon, mirroring his interest in the dissemination of scientific ideas (Pagetti 1986, 48; see also Pearson 2007, 61). In this way, not only does the scientific romance articulate an explicit process of cultural contamination, but it also anticipates the intertextual polysemy of the graphic novel, which in *LEG*'s case still retains a potential for didacticism: "that's good, the idea that you can use a comic to make people interested in books again" (Moore in Khoury 2003, 183). We can thus construe Wells's romances as an early attempt at pastiche, without the formal experimentation of modernism and postmodernism (see Draper 1987, 33), but nonetheless capable of merging sources of the literary canon within the narrative conventions of popular fiction. Therefore, in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, the utopian chronotope of the island is enriched by a network of references which include Homer's Odyssey, William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Pagetti 1986, 19; Atwood 2005, xx), while in *WWs* the gravity of the apocalyptic scenario is suggested through a series of allusions to the Greek mythology and the Bible.[11]

Lastly, Wellsian fiction implies the concept of 'shared diegetic space' through cross-textual allusions, embryonically anticipating the notion of narrative continuity as developed in twentieth-century American superhero comics. Besides the connection between *WWs* and *The Crystal Egg*, the most glaring example can be found in *The Sleeper Awakes*, in which a minor character discusses events of the late Victorian Era from a near future, mentioning a "War" and "these Martians" (Herbert George Wells [1910] 2005, xxxiii), i.e. possible references to the invaders in *WWs*.[12] Moreover, several critics suggest that *The Sleeper Awakes* and the novella *A Story of the Days to Come* ([1899] 1900) are set in the same futuristic scenario (Williamson 1973, 103; Suvin 1983, 78). Through the mediation of the graphic-novel form, Wells's romance is thus rearticulated as space of fertile contamination, in which the intertextual awareness is brought to the fore via the latent mechanism of shared continuity.

In addition to the formal and structural devices, *LEG*'s genealogical approach retrospectively establishes thematic and generic links between the two literary domains. As Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey suggest, the series "points to the sharp lines that exist between late

nineteenth-century popular fiction and the later world of comics, American superheroes, and the graphic novel" (2015, 212). Therefore, if we consider the development of the superhero genre, we can thus assess an ideal connection between Wells's scientific romances, and the utopian, revisionary Anglo-American graphic novels of the 1980s (like Alan Moore and David Gibbons's *Watchmen*, and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*). As self-contained narratives, these graphic novels reinvigorated the popular comic-book form, while revisiting and subverting the superhero generic formulas for a sophisticated adult audience.

The cultural artefact mediating between Wells and the graphic novel is the superhero comic book, popularized by the creation of Superman in 1938, and since then a staple of American popular culture. The first full-fledged superhero marked in fact the origin of both genre and archetype, which reformulated in a novel manner the aesthetic and narrative tropes codified in the 1930s American pulp magazines (Bongco 2000, 96). We can identify it as the same cultural and geographical context in which Wells himself was incorporated, when Hugo Gernsback started reprinting his romances, "[woving] him into the fabric of pulp sf" (Rieder 2009, 23), and rediscovering him "for a new generation of readers" (Williamson 1973, 6). Wells can be said to have influenced, both directly and indirectly, the creation of the archetype in the 1930s American comic books, and its postmodern deconstructionist revision of the 1980s Anglo-American graphic novels. To a certain extent, the superhero genre partakes in the tradition of twentieth-century American utopian sci-fi that looked at the British, (anti-)utopian romancers (like Wells) as a major source of inspiration (Pagetti [1970] 2012, 127).

1.3   The Eutopian Superhuman

Wells's romances anticipate a central motif of twentieth-century Anglo-American superhero comics, i.e. the often ambiguous and conflicted relationship between superhumanity and utopia. The latter term is here employed in the meaning codified by L. T. Sargent, who defines it as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space" (Sargent 1994, 9). Moving from this 'neutral' conceptualisation, the critic further elaborates other accessory definitions, encompassing the different authorial attitudes towards the process of fictional social engineering. Among these, the most relevant here are "eutopia", i.e. a utopia "that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the

society in which the reader lived"; dystopia, or "negative utopia" which differs in being "considerably worse"; and anti-utopia, i.e. a utopia that is devised "as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular utopia" (*ibid.*).

Decades before the homonymous – and eponymous – costumed superhero, Wells's literary 'superman' is conceived as an evolutionary fantasy, first characterised as a threat to humanity – i.e. working towards dystopian or apocalyptic scenarios –, and later as a symbolic and material vehicle of social betterment – i.e. promoting eutopia. This polarization seems to replicate the traditional distinction between an early, 'pessimistic' and a later, 'optimistic' Wells (see West [1957] 1976; Williamson 1973, 5), a notion that "has lost some of its value" (Draper 1987, 113), but which nonetheless suggests the author's response to the epistemological shifts of the time. In this regard, it can be pointed out that the double nature of Wells's superhuman hypostatises the *zeitgeist* of the British late nineteenth century, "a period of *fin de siècle* anxieties about the future", but also "a time of eager aspirations, when the growth of socialism and popular education and scientific progress seemed to promise a new and transformed future for the mass of humanity" (Bergonzi 1976b, 3).

The Wellsian superman's transformation from menacing to eutopian figure can also be said to prefigure the subsequent development of the archetype in early twentieth-century Anglo-American science-fiction. As Thomas Andrae suggests, taking into account novels and short stories by popular writers as Olaf Stapleton, John Taine, Stanley G. Weinbaum, or Philip Wylie:

> Far from being the icon of perfection he was later to become, the early superman was an inveterate outsider, a monstrous freak who, like the Frankenstein monster, was tormented and persecuted because ordinary people could not comprehend his superior powers, abnormal appearance, or strange personality. (1980, 87–88)

In these early tales, "It is not clear whether the superman is the possible saviour or the potential conqueror and destroyer of humanity" (88). What is evident is that he (or she, as in Weinbaum's "The Adaptive Ultimate") cannot coexist with the rest of humanity (see also Coogan 2006, 127–28). The only positive *übermensch* of pulp sci-fi is E. R. Burroughs's John Carter, allegedly because the Martian dislocation releases the character from the necessity of confronting his might with the larger society. Hence, the possibility of conjugating superhumanity with a progressive effort towards the creation of a better (urban, American) society only (re)appears in 1938, with the comic book character Superman, who is "neither

alienated from society nor a misanthropic, power-obsessed menace but a truly messianic figure" (Andrae 1980, 89).

The link between Wells, superheroes and utopia – both as a philosophical concept and a literary genre – was already suggested in what can be regarded as one of the earliest attempts at serious comics criticism. In "From Little Nemo to Li'l Abner: Comic Strips as Present-Day American Folklore," originally published in 1949, Heinz Politzer scrutinises the (at the time relatively new) Superman character:

> Superman has about him something of Goethe's Sorcerer's Apprentice, of Dr. Faust, of Hercules, and of Atlas. To be sure, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells also make their contribution to his costume and trappings, but essentially he owes his effect to the vanishing remnants of ancient mythology, that collective memory of mankind which has here been combined with Utopian anticipation. (Politzer [1949] 1963, 51)

As he outlines several structural features of the character – the intertextual pastiche, or the tension between de-historicized myth and utopian future – the critic points out the influence of Wells, whose 1901 non-fiction blockbuster *Anticipations* is recalled at the end of the passage.

In more recent years, the importance of Wells in the birth and development of the superhero genre has been analysed by Peter Coogan, who claims that "H.G. Wells gathered the strands of the *Homo superior* figure and laid out most of the themes that were to follow until the creation of Superman himself. Wells provides a bridge between the supermen of nineteenth-century science fiction and those of the twentieth, as his writing did for science fiction generally" (2006, 129). In reconstructing the genealogy of the popular superhuman, the critic in fact pinpoints three different 'modern' influences that are to be added to the roots in myth, legend and religion: the "science-fiction superman", which originated with *Frankenstein* (1818), the "dual-identity avenger-vigilante", and the "pulp *übermensch*" (127). Coogan singles outs several Wellsian contributions to the first sphere of influence: *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1897 and 1898), *The Food of the Gods* (1904) and *Men Like Gods* (1923), the ultimate "superhuman utopia" (Coogan 2006, 132).

In addition to these texts, another Wellsian romance can be said to anticipate in a more relevant and sophisticated way the birth and development of superhero comics. *When the Sleeper Wakes* (especially in the original, illustrated edition, serialised in *The Graphic* in 1899) merges in fact the posthuman and the dystopian trends of Wells's early *scientific* romances, while paving the way for the subsequent, variously eutopian phase of his literary production.

As earliest Wellsian attempt at urban utopia, *WSW* is dialectically structured on the relationship between the *locus* – the future megalopolis extrapolated from contemporary London –, and the *übermensch* as "utopian enclave", namely "a foreign body within the social [that offers] a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on" (Jameson 2005, 16). In this regard, the romance subverts one of the central tenets of nineteenth-century utopian literature, i.e. the idea that the ideal society "was to be delivered by history itself, as the more or less inevitable consequence of its unfolding logic. Utopia was not the deliberate conscious construct of a wise monarch or legislator, a King Utopus or King Solamona" (Kumar 1987, 75). Moreover, *WSW*'s intertextual relationship with the utopian tradition and the related formulation of superhumanity are further problematized by the incorporation of a series of literary, cultural and aesthetic tensions. These heterogeneous contaminations contribute to the romance's structural ambiguity, which will percolate through the dystopian and anti-utopian narratives of the twentieth century (Suvin 1979, 218; Kumar 1987, 186–87).

As "transitional work" (Huntington 1982, 125), *WSW* develops on the aesthetic and narrative tropes established in Wells's early anti-utopian romances, i.e. *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), The *Invisibile Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Through a process of critical revision, *WSW* rearticulates the two tightly interwoven concepts that underpin the early Wells's reflection on superhumanity. On the one hand, we find the posthuman character, i.e. the (often threatening) result of the evolutionary process. On the other hand, the representational strategies trigger a deanthropizing mechanism – determined by the epistemological changes of the nineteenth century – that produces grotesque results. At the core of the dialectic between posthuman and non-human there lies *WSW*'s hero, Graham, who is (tentatively and partially) able to epitomise the utopian superhuman. For arguably the first and last time in Wells's production, the 'advancement of the human race' is thus in the hands of a single individual, as a monadic prototype of the later utopias' collective superhumanity.

Producing an "alternative historical hypothesis" (Suvin 1979, 49) via extrapolation, rather than ideal abstraction, *WSW* reimagines for a new scientific audience the myth of the messianic hero.[13] Graham is the nexus through which (e)utopia – as a concept and literary tradition – is absorbed and re-produced for a technological future. In this regard, the romance forecasts the eutopian discourse of superhero comics, both in the euergetic individualism of Depression-era Superman, and in the utopian-dystopian dialectics of 1980s graphic novels. Furthermore, the

superhuman utopianism is not the sole element absorbed by twentieth-century superhero comics. *WSW* in fact can be said to anticipate numerous aesthetic and narrative formulations, like the urban scenario; the obsession with heights; the play of identities; the saviour-hero's relationship with the masses; the lack of narrative closure. The most significant secondary motif is arguably the 'hero's awakening' trope, absorbed both indirectly – Clark Kent's coming-of-age –, and more literally, as in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Captain America*, or Alan Moore's *Miracleman*.[14]

Thanks to the cultural resilience, and the formulas' flexibility, the superhero genre can be used as a tool for the analytical study of popular culture. In particular, the utopian implications reveal the ways in which the archetype relates to historical and epistemological discontinuities in Anglo-American contemporary cultures. From the scientific romance to the graphic novel, from *When the Sleeper Wakes* to *Miracleman*, the pop *übermensch* serves as a powerful metaphor for the exploration of modernity, both in the early twentieth-century cultural modernism, and in the later crisis of metanarratives known as postmodernity. Therefore, the cognitive roots of the character are to be found in the *zeitgeist* and *episteme* that paved the way for 'modern' science fiction, i.e. the scientific and philosophical culture of the (late) Victorian age.

1.4 "The Coming Beast": Evolution or Ethics in *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*

In a well-known passage from the 1891 essay "Zoological Retrogression," Wells describes the evolutionary precariousness of the human race:

> There is, therefore, no guarantee in scientific knowledge of man's permanence or permanent ascendency.
> […] Still, so far as any scientist can tell us, it may be that, instead of this, Nature is, in unsuspected obscurity, equipping some now humble creature with wider possibilities of appetite, endurance, or destruction, to rise in the fulness of time and sweep homo away into the darkness from which his universe arose. The Coming Beast must certainly be reckoned in any calculations regarding the Coming Man. (Herbert George Wells [1891b] 1975, 168)

The idea that some "humble creature" could overcome humanity by displaying "wider possibilities" is disturbing, as is the outlook that a "Coming Beast" might be a possible alternative the man of the future. With all its religious and apocalyptic undertones, the "Coming Beast" image incorporates the two connected anxieties that inform the "Sense of Dethronement" of Wells's early romances (see Parrinder 1995, 49–64): the fear of being surpassed by the ones who are "coming", and the possibility that they might be not human at all. Like the dinosaurs, which much fascinated the Victorians, man might be on the verge of utter extinction.

The theory of evolution, proposed and popularised by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), is to be regarded as the scientific and epistemological foundation of this biological concern. The deep influence of Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley (and, to a lesser extent, Herbert Spencer) on Wells is well-documented, and is acknowledged by the author himself in his autobiography:

> Darwin and Huxley, in their place and measure, belong to the same aristocracy as Plato and Aristotle and Galileo, and they will ultimately dominate the priestly and orthodox mind as surely, because there is a response, however reluctant, masked and stifled, in every human soul to rightness and a firmly stated truth. (Herbert George Wells [1934] 1984, vol. 1, 203)

Wells describes the year he spent studying under Huxley as "the most educational year of my life. It left me under that urgency for coherence and consistency, that repugnance from haphazard assumptions and arbitrary statements, which is the essential distinction of the educated from the uneducated mind" (201). Here Wells is also stressing the importance of the scientific method that, rather than mere ideas or theories, is increasingly gaining ground as the sole epistemological certainty of the 'new' science (see Philmus and Hughes 1975b, 2–3; Vallorani 1996a, 21–29).

Besides the direct influence on Wells, the Theory of Evolution – and, by extension, the scientific method – also played a major role in the late nineteenth-century revival of the utopian genre, which "clearly found a new conceptual status thanks to Darwin and the advent of evolutionism" (Porta 1997, 19). Darwin's theories – variously mixed with socialism, and later developed as Social Darwinism – were in fact the scientific underpinning of several works published in and after the 1870s, when the utopian genre regained significance on both sides of the Atlantic. The literary trend can be said to have started with *The Coming Race* (1871; also known as *Vril, the Power of the Coming Race*) by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who claimed to have

written the novel to demonstrate "the Darwinian proposition that a coming race is destined to supplant our races" (quoted in Kumar 1987, 65).

We can see that Wells's early scientific romances elaborate the posthuman while putting under scrutiny the evolutionary discourse on which they are based. Not only does Wells use "the perspective he acquired through his social dislocation and science training as a means to challenge the existing world" (Draper 1987, 54), but he also aims at exposing the flaws and contradictions of his own scientific understanding. In this sense, his first major fictional work, *The Time Machine* (hereinafter *TM*), include some seminal concepts that will shape the narrative speculation of the subsequent romances.

The theoretical framework of the novel revolves around an ambivalent conceptualisation of Darwinian evolution: on the one hand, the evolutionary process apparently triggers a form of "Zoological Retrogression" (Herbert George Wells [1891b] 1975) resulting in the sub-human Eloi and Morlocks; on the other hand, the symbiotic organization of the degraded human race nonetheless confirms the "biological view of progress as adjustment to environment" (Williamson 1973, 96). In the year 802,701, as the Time Traveller observes, "Man had not remained one species, but had differentiated into two distinct animals" (Herbert George Wells [1895] 2005, 46), which share to various degree an "intellectual degradation" (62). The environment also contributes to this sense of degeneration: even though the future (aboveground) London looks like a bucolic utopia – "There were no hedges, no signs of proprietary rights, no evidences of agriculture; the whole earth had become a garden" (*TM*, 30) –, the buildings are decaying: "The stained-glass windows, which displayed only a geometrical pattern, were broken in many places, and the curtains that hung across the lower end were thick with dust. And it caught my eye that the corner of the marble table near me was fractured" (27).

In order to convey the exotic alterity of the degraded future, Wells appropriates the formula of the imperialist romance. In this regard, the romance adheres to and reinvigorates the tropes of classic sci-fi, in which "meetings with alien others have usually been modelled on the European narratives of voyages of discovery of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Fitting 2000, 127). The Time Traveller describes a vaguely orientalised future London – the sphynx, the "much hotter […] weather of this Golden Age" (*TM*, 44) –, and two racialized breeds of natives, the 'good' and the 'bad', future descendants of Ariel and Caliban. It can be said that *TM* produces a mirror image of the late-Victorian colonial fiction (epitomised by Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* 1885), in which "the journey to the imperial frontier becomes

imaginatively a journey into the past of Europe" (Cantor and Hufnagel 2006, 37). As Marlow points out in *Heart of Darkness*, "We were wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (Conrad [1902] 1994, 51). Therefore, for Wells, if colonial expeditions are akin to time travel, 'real' time travel must be similar to a colonial expedition.

In the symbolic space of racial otherness, the romance elaborates on the evolutionary theory by confuting the teleological vision of continuous advancement of the human race. In this respect, Wells takes into account two different, but closely interrelated phenomena that might impede the march towards "successively higher grades of being" (Herbert George Wells [1891b] 1975, 158): the first is a limitation intrinsic to the evolutionary process that goes under the name of "retrogressive metamorphosis" – expression coined in 1880 by E. Ray Lankaster (see *TM*, 103, n.1) – or, as Wells would put it, "zoological retrogression". It regards the relationship between animal and nature. The second phenomenon is specific to the human race, and is rooted in the conflict between the 'survival-of the-fittest' principle and the ethical superstructure of society.

The notion of "zoological retrogression" contrasts with what Wells calls "Excelsior biology", i.e. the widespread belief in "the inevitable tendency to higher and better things with which the word 'evolution' is popularly associated" (Herbert George Wells [1891b] 1975, 159). In this regard, he stresses the possibility that 'lesser beings' might be more suitable to survive and adapt to the ever-changing conditions of the planet – as the mud-fish. Wells also points out that "the most fruitful and efficient cause of degradation" is rooted in "that loathsome tendency [to] parasitism" (163). The idea seems to be drawn from Lankaster, who in *Degeneration: a Chapter in Darwinism* states, "Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained, seem to lead as a rule to Degeneration" (1880, 33). This is the case for the Morloks, who are literally parasites. But also the Eloi have degenerated because of the easy attainment of "food and safety", which results from the improved conditions of the surrounding environment. This latter development takes into account a different variable, i.e. humans' exclusive capacity to alter in a significant way their own condition of existence.

This theoretical framework shapes the narrative speculation of *TM*. In the romance, the possible causes and developments of de-evolutionary retrogression are formulated through a mechanistic approach, still somehow influenced by Lamarckism (see Philmus and Hughes 1975b, n. 26): man evolves adapting to and improving the environment. Once the latter reaches

utopian perfection, stagnation arises. Generalised physical and mental decay is the only logical consequence:

> with this change in condition comes inevitably adaptations to the change. What, unless biological science is a mass of errors, is the cause of human intelligence and vigour? Hardship and freedom: conditions under which the active, strong, and subtle survive and the weaker go to the wall; conditions that put a premium upon the loyal alliance of capable men, upon self-restraint, patience, and decision. […]
> I thought of the physical slightness of the people, their lack of intelligence, and those big abundant ruins, and it strengthened my belief in a perfect conquest of Nature. For after the battle comes Quiet. Humanity had been strong, energetic, and intelligent, and had used all its abundant vitality to alter the conditions under which it lived. And now came the reaction of the altered conditions. (*TM*, 32)

Later on, after the encounter with the Morlocks, the Time Traveller has the chance to refine his position: "It is a law of nature we overlook, that intellectual versatility is the compensation for change, danger, and trouble. […] Nature never appeals to intelligence until habit and instinct are useless. There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change" (*TM*, 79). The idea that "this age-long march of progress has been […] in fact the cause of the later decay" (Williamson 1973, 54) is a recurring motif in Wells's early fiction, which expresses a range of anxieties about the future. Through the journey of the Traveller, Wells partakes in the *fin-de-siècle* paranoia of Max Nordau, whose *Degeneration* (written in 1892 and translated into English in 1895) "curiously anticipates the themes and dominant images of *The Time Machine*" (Bergonzi 1976c, 54).

Eventually, human biological degeneration is superseded by the entropic decay of the universe (see Batchelor 1985, 6). At the end of *TM*, the Traveller makes a final leap in the future, "more than thirty million years" (*TM*, 84) after the future age of the giant crabs to which he had escaped from the Morlocks. He finds a desolated, almost lifeless earth, where "the huge red-hot dome of the sun had come to obscure nearly a tenth part of the darkling heavens" (*ibid*.). This image matches the scientific understanding of the time, i.e. the apocalyptic corollary of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, according to which "the sun and other stars must eventually cool and burn down" (Parrinder 1995, 39; see also Kumar 1987, 175).[15]

The idea of "Zoological Retrogression" parallels another related, dominant theme of Wells's romances, i.e. the conflict between the Huxleyan notions of "cosmic process" and "ethical process". Reformulating a point already present in Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), and further discussed by Herbert Spencer, Huxley in "Evolution and Ethics" states that

Men in society are undoubtedly subject to the cosmic process. As among other animals, multiplication goes on without cessation, and involves severe competition for the means of support. The struggle for existence tends to eliminate those less fitted to adapt themselves to the circumstances of their existence. The strongest, the most self-assertive, tend to tread down the weaker. But the influence of the cosmic process on the evolution of society is the greater the more rudimentary its civilization. Social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process; the end of which is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest, in respect of the whole of the conditions which obtain, but of those who are ethically the best. (T. H. Huxley 1895, 85)

Although acknowledging the practical difficulties,[16] Huxley is ready to entertain the idea that the "ethical process" might 'substitute', or at least amend, the indifferent and amoral laws of the universe: "the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it" (83).

However, Wells is more prone to question the possible interaction of the two principles, which in his works are often exemplified by the opposition between 'nature' and 'society'. In the essay "Human Evolution, an Artificial Process", Wells points out the human specificity in the biological history of the world: "the evolutionary process now operating in the social body is one essentially different from that which has differentiated species in the past and raised man to his ascendency among the animals. It is a process new in this world's history" (Herbert George Wells [1896] 1975, 211). Through language, men have in fact developed a societal organization and a complex array of moral principles, which are at odds with the necessities of the race: "it is incredible that a moral disposition, any more than an anatomical one, can have come into being when it was – as are these desires and dispositions just mentioned in civilised man – directly prejudicial to the interests of the species in which it was developed" (215). In a later essay, "Morals and Civilization", Wells further elaborates "The conflict between [man's] innate Palaeolithic disposition and this artificial factor imposed thereon" ([1897] 1975, 220). In order to ensure the preservation of all the members of society, the animal nature of man (i.e. the one conforming to the evolutionary process) is to be subdued: "what was eminent virtue in the tribal savage may ultimately become sin in the civilised man" (222). Nonetheless, in spite of the grim outlook, both scripts end on a positive note, which somehow anticipates the utopian dispositions of the later Wells:

In the future, it is at least conceivable, trained men may conduct this operation far more intelligently, unanimously, and effectively, and work toward a social organization so cunningly balanced against exterior necessities on the one hand, and the artificial factor in the individual on the other, that the life of every human being may be generally happy. […] This view, in fact, reconciles a scientific faith in evolution with optimism. (Herbert George Wells [1896] 1975, 218)

Here Wells is prefiguring the rise of an illuminated intelligentsia. He elaborates Huxley's wish for a "common effort" (T. H. Huxley 1895, 85) to imagine a ruling class of thinkers capable of mediating between society and "the exterior necessities" of evolution, and possibly between the conflicting strata of society itself. The ending of "Morals and Civilization" is even more idealistic: "And yet one may dream of an informal, unselfish, unauthorised body of workers, a real and conscious apparatus of education and moral suggestion, held together by a common faith and a common sentiment, and shaping the minds and acts and destinies of men" (Herbert George Wells [1897] 1975, 228).

As Michael Draper argues, "*The Time Machine* depicts the consequences if this revolutionary class should fail to appear" (1987, 38). Per the Time Traveller's (still partial) interpretation, the Eloi's physical and mental inadequacy derives from the triumph of social security and the subsequent stagnancy. Therefore, not only is degeneration linked to a general law of retrogression – in the form of a de-evolutionary incident –, but it is also rooted in the specific organization of the human communities, whose ethical substratum impedes the natural workings of the evolutionary process. As soon as every member of a community is given a chance to survive, the 'survival-of-the-fittest' model ceases to be applicable:

For the first time I began to realize an odd consequence of the social effort in which we are at present engaged. And yet, come to think, it is a logical consequence enough. Strength is the outcome of need; security sets a premium on feebleness. The work of ameliorating the conditions of life – the true civilizing process that makes life more and more secure – had gone steadily on to a climax. One triumph of a united humanity over Nature had followed another. (*TM*, 31)

Later, the Traveller suggests that the outset of this process is already visible in his (and thus Wells's, and the reader's) own age: "Even in our own time certain tendencies and desires, once necessary to survival, are a constant source of failure. Physical courage and the love of battle, for instance, are no great help – may even be hindrances – to a civilized man" (32–33). Here the Traveller's method works in a circular way. First, he inductively elaborates the laws

of development that determine the future (i.e. the same models underpinning Wells's 'scientific' method for forecasting the future)[17]. Then, he employs those conclusions to improve his retrospective understanding of the present. The deterministic connection between the contemporary situation and the fictional representation of the future anticipates the technique of the later Wells, who "turned to the extrapolation of future societies from existing social and technological trends" (Parrinder 1995, 27)

Through a series of hypothesis and adjustments, the reader shares the Traveller's attempt at unravelling the outcomes of the evolutionary process. In this sense, *TM* situates the posthuman at the core of the tensions inherent in the theories of Darwin, Huxley and – to a certain extent – Lamarck. However, the hermeneutical framework is not complete until the societal organization is deciphered. Therefore, the protagonist has to move from a biologist perspective to a sociological approach, taking in account the ways in which the relationship between Morlock and Eloi is organised. According to Bergonzi, "The traveller now has to reformulate his ideas about the way the evolutionary development has proceeded [...]. He has to modify his previous 'Darwinian' explanations by a 'Marxist' one" (1976c, 47). Even though the latter term should be used with great care – Wells's anti-Marxism is well documented –,[18] this epistemological shift significantly prefigures the author's subsequent interest in the social sciences, which will provide the ground for his later utopian speculations (see Kumar 1987, 188).

This further array of theoretical tools (be they Marxist or, more realistically, socialist) allows the Traveller to understand that the evolutionary fork has a societal underpinning, rooted in the contemporary conditions: "from proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position" (*TM*, 48). The spatial organization of future London – which anticipates the vertical urbanity of *WSW* – is thus the paroxysm of the late nineteenth-century social stratification: "in the end, above ground you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty, and below ground the Have-nots, the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour" (*ibid.*).

However, the *anagnorisis* is still incomplete. The Sphynx's riddle is finally solved when the Traveller realises that the Morlocks feed on the Eloi, a fact so horrible that it cannot even be verbalised: "Clearly, at some time in the Long-Ago of human decay the Morlocks' food had run short. [...]. Even now man is far less discriminating and exclusive in his food than he was

– far less than any monkey. His prejudice against human flesh is no deep-seated instinct. And so these inhuman sons of men —!" (*TM*, 62). During the centuries of natural and social degeneration, the servants have continued to assist the masters because of a vestigial impulse – "an old habit of service" (58). At a certain point, necessity (i.e. hunger) has reawakened primordial instincts, and the dim-witted Eloi have been turned into "mere fatted cattle, which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon – probably saw to the breeding of" (62). In the year 802,701, class struggle and revolution are possible only as grotesque parody.

Grim as this outlook may be, it nonetheless confirms two corollaries of evolutionism that recur in Wells's early scientific romances. First, the idea that imagined societies, or utopias, should not be static. As the Traveller remarks, "that perfect state had lacked one thing even for mechanical perfection – absolute permanency" (*TM*, 79). This Heraclitean principle of permanent change[19] – also producing the 'giant crabs' and the 'dying earth' worlds seen at the end of the novel – adheres to the literary and philosophical trends of nineteenth-century utopianism, when Thomas Moore's conceptualisation of a secluded, eternal enclave was rejected in favour of an ever-shifting utopia located in the future (Kumar 1987, 42–45).[20]

In the second place, we can see that the Morlock-Eloi relationship epitomises Wells's post-Darwinian vision of progress as "unceasing process of biological adaptation" (Williamson 1973, 97). As he would put it, "Evolution is no mechanical tendency making for perfection according to the ideas current in the year of grace 1897; it is simply the continual adaptation of plastic life, for good or evil, to the circumstances that surround it" (Herbert George Wells 1898, 163). Ultimately, the social and historical explanation of the evolutionary fork is to be revised (again) through a biologistic model (Parrinder 1995, 75). In this regard, the need for adaptation against the universal entropy comes to be represented by the disharmonic symbiosis between the two groups – also recalled by the "lichens" seen in the year thirty million (*TM*, 84). Therefore, although progress disappoints the great expectations of humanity, producing feebleminded effeminate caricatures and brutish monstrosities, its laws and theoretical framework can still be declared valid. With hindsight, this is a small consolation, and *TM* can be regarded as Wells's bleakest romance. The hope for humankind lies the stoic resignation that closes the fable – "it remains for us to live as though it were not so" (90) –, or in the acknowledgment that sometime before the age visited by the Traveller, a 'proper' utopia must have been achieved.

The same concerns about the outcomes of progress and evolution inform Wells's third romance, *The War of the Worlds* (hereinafter *WWs*). Serialised in 1897 and reprinted in a revised form the following year, the novel dramatizes the Huxleyan tension between evolution and ethics, describing "a universe in which good and evil are relative, depending on your ecological position" (Draper 1987, 51). In other words, *WWs* shows that ethical values are inconsistent and accidental, while the evolutionary process is indifferent to man's – or any other creature's – happiness (see Williamson 1973, 99). Therefore, even though the Martians are described as ruthless, "unsympathetic" monsters (*WWs*, 7), they are also reframed as a superior race, striving to survive a dying planet, and "simply exercising its evolutionary prerogative" (Fitting 2000, 137)**.** The ontological relativism is more explicit in the serialized version of the novel (Herbert George Wells [1897] 1978) (hereinafter *sWWs*), in which the narrator defines the invasion as "the way of Nature" (*sWWs*, 7). Later on, he even suggests that

> Man who vivisects the lower animal certainly has no claim to exemption when in his turn he becomes a lower animal. Certainly nothing else that we know of the Martians points to their being needlessly cruel. […] Indisputably they inflicted enormous agonies; indisputably Martians and men cannot exist permanently upon the same planet; but that is no reason why we should tell lies upon ethical points. They fought for their kind and we for ours. But as for right, I do not believe that there is any right in the world, save the sense of justice between man and man. All the rest, I hold, is physical law. (s*WWs*, 83)

In both editions, the main character reconfigures the relationship between humans and Martians through a proportion, a classic Wellsian device (see Suvin 1979, 237–42):

> And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (*WWs*, 9)

As a work of science-fiction, *WWs* relies on "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 1979) to produce a new vision of the world, in which the centrality of man is challenged and renegotiated. Wells's reference to the "Tasmanians" and "European immigrants" has brought some critics to narrowly construe *WWs* a critique or satire of imperialism (Batchelor 1985, 27), as the novel "portrays the Martian invasion of England as an experience of colonisation in reverse" (Parrinder 1995, 75). However, this account should be refined in the light of Wells's own mixed

position on the British Empire. Even though his 'imperialist' character are often derided as chauvinist – like the main characters in *The War in the Air*, or Catskill (i.e. Churchill) in *Men Like Gods* – he considered it as a viable, albeit somehow antiquate, prototype for the World State. In any case, he regarded British imperialism as more decent and humane than the vicious German counterpart. In his autobiography, he writes that "The British Empire, I said, had to be the precursor of a world-state or nothing. [...] ([1934] 1984, 762). He also suggests that "the League of Free Nations [...] must end not only this new German imperialism, which is struggling so savagely and powerfully to possess the earth, but it must also wind up British imperialism and French imperialism, which do now so largely and inaggressively possess it" (699). In his *A Short History of the World* he is more apologetic: "[The Empire] guaranteed a wide peace and security; that is why it was endured and sustained by many men of the 'subject' races" (1922, 407). Therefore, rather than seeing *WWs* as a parody, or a critique, we may agree with Fredric Jameson, who describes the romance as "a guilt fantasy on the part of Victorian man who wonders whether the brutality with which he has used the colonial peoples (the extinction of the Tasmanians) may not be visited on him by some more advanced race intent, in its turn, on his destruction" (2005, 265).

Be it a critique or a "guilt fantasy", the romance can be said to hypostatise the ontological and epistemological decentring produced by the new discourse of science. This is made explicit at the very end of the novel, when the narrator draws some conclusions about the failed invasion and its aftermath:

> our views of the human future must be greatly modified by these events. We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding place for Man; we can never anticipate the unseen good or evil that may come upon us suddenly out of space. It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind. (Herbert George Wells [1898] 2005, 178–79)

As the borders of the Earth (and the Empire) are discovered to be permeable, the monstrous other is free to break into London, hitting at the core of civilisation. However, the tone of these conclusive remarks is not as gloomy as it was in *TM*. The narrator is acknowledging that he sudden and catastrophic repositioning in the food-chain is likely to impede the stagnation that, as the Eloi have demonstrated, stifles the evolutionary process.

Moreover, this passage contains a brief but meaningful anticipation of the later utopianist Wells, in the notion of the "commonweal of mankind". This idea forecasts the Mind of the Race (or Open Conspiracy) developed in Wells's later works, and it also introduces a central motif of much Western twentieth-century popular fiction – and especially the utopian graphic novels of the 1980s –, i.e. the societal cohesion achieved through an external, common threat (see Jameson 2005, 83).

Apropos of the relationship between Wells and later superhero comics, *WWs*'s significance lies in the ways in which it reinvigorates the popular late-nineteenth-, early-twentieth-century tradition of the invasion novel, inaugurated in 1871 by George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (see Batchelor 1985, 7, 24; Fitting 2000, 130–31). Wells's romance in fact articulates the cognitive possibility of an extra-terrestrial "novum" as transformative agent producing an alternative, utopian scenario (see Pagetti 1986, 34–35). The hermeneutic paradigm of *TM* is therefore overturned, and the human narrator is decentred as static observer who is acted upon, while Martians "insist on being heroes, characters, plot, to the exclusion of every human interest, even as they trampled over the beaten world during that terrible June" (*sWWs*, 79).

Furthermore, the material and symbolic collision between man and alien is reconfigured by the novel's evolutionist framework, which produces a conceptual shift. The Martians are in fact deduced to be a possible evolution of man, just like Mars represents the future Earth, according to the "then prevailing theory of planetary formation" (Sawyer in Herbert George Wells [1898] 2005, 187). As the knowledgeable narrator points out, "The planet Mars […] must be, if the nebular hypothesis has any truth, older than our world" (7). Therefore, "it is not only more distant from life's beginning, but nearer its end" (8). This implies that the creatures facing extinction on Mars must be more evolved than their earthling counterparts:

> To me it is quite credible that the Martians may be descended from beings not unlike ourselves, by a gradual development of brain and hands (the latter giving rise to the two bunches of delicate tentacles at last) at the expense of the rest of the body. Without the body the brain would, of course, become a mere selfish intelligence, without any of the emotional substratum of the human being. (*WWs*, 127)

WWs shows in a clear manner that the 'Coming Man' *is* the 'Coming Beast'. In the words of Darko Suvin, "The strange is menacing because it looms in the future of man" (1979, 29). The spatial-geographical conflict turns into a temporal-historical one, in a gesture which

reverses *TM*'s spatialization of time. In addition, the passage suggests that the Martian's depravity is not only caused by their somehow legitimate struggle for survival (as the serialised edition is more willing to admit), but also by a physical modification that has removed the creatures' "emotional substratum", turning them into hyper-intelligent, ruthless war machines.[21] As Wells's most explicit "criticism of man's intellect" (Williamson 1973, 32) – a motif also present in the coeval *Invisible Man* – *WWs* thus overturns the retrogressive hypothesis dramatized in *TM*. Both outcomes imagined by Wells are disturbing: should the ethical underpinning of society prevail, and hence stifle the evolutionary process, man would revert into the feeble, effeminate Eloi. By contrast, if the 'culminating ape' should be allowed to evolve, it could become a tentacled, vampiric brain-monster without any apparent sense of morality.

In *WWs*, "Wells establishes physical evolution as the source of the Martians' superhumanity" (Coogan 2006, 130). The author had already described the horrific characteristics of future humanity in a previous article, which serves as main source for the novel, and is explicitly mentioned by the narrator (*WWs*, 127). In "Man of Year Million" (1893), later reprinted as "Of a Book Unwritten" (1898), he deduces from the contemporary habits the that "The coming man, then, will clearly have a larger brain, and a slighter body than the present. […] The human hand, since it is the teacher and interpreter of the brain, will become constantly more powerful and subtle as the rest of the musculature dwindles" (Herbert George Wells 1898, 164). The eating habits will also change in a drastic manner, and "some cunning exterior mechanism will presently masticate and insalivate his dinner, relieve his diminishing salivary glands and teeth, and at last altogether abolish them" (166). Therefore, the novel's Martians lacked "all the complex apparatus of digestion […] They were heads – merely heads. Entrails they had none. They did not eat, much less digest. Instead, they took the fresh, living blood of other creatures, and injected it into their own veins" (*WWs*, 125).

Wells's essay, cited to substantiate the narrative speculation of *WWs*, suggests a unidirectional evolutionary process. Men will mutate into "great unemotional intelligences" (Herbert George Wells 1898, 170), with enormous brains and atrophied bodies. Therefore, the novel's Martians must rely on elaborated machinery to overcome their physical deficiency, "wearing different bodies according to their needs" (*WWs*, 129). As Peter Fitting suggests, "Wells's vision of human evolution as represented by the Martians includes what we would now call our almost symbiotic dependence on machine (the themes of prosthetics and cyborgs)"

(2000, 136) The three-legged "fighting machine" is arguably the most famous image of Wells's whole fictional production. Wells takes the Delphic Tripod, a Greek divinatory tool (see Parrinder 1995, 19–20) which he mentions in a 1888 letter to Elizabeth Healy (Herbert George Wells 1996, 108), and turns it into an omen of catastrophe. It prefigures the destructiveness of the First World War, which would start in a few years. As the narrator comments, "Never before in the history of warfare had destruction been so indiscriminate and so universal" (*WWs*, 55).

In *WWs*, the triangle of man, posthuman and machine is reconfigured: the last ceases to be an elegant hermeneutic tool, which the human can use to approach, explore and understand their own evolutionary possibilities (as seen in *TM*). It becomes an instrument that the future – man's future – may use to annihilate the very possibility of evolution. A possible alternative to extinction is suggested by the artilleryman, who envisages a sort of underground utopia in the sewers, where "able-bodied, clear-minded men" (*WWs*, 157) will be able to thrive, hidden from the overground Martians. The enclave will not accept the "weaklings", who "ought to be willing to die. It's a sort of disloyalty, after all, to live and taint the race" (*ibid*.). These words anticipate the eugenic tendencies of the later Wells (McLean 2009, 110), displayed in the utopias as *Men Like Gods* – "For centuries now Utopia science has been able to discriminate among births" (Herbert George Wells [1923] 1976, 64) –, and detailed in non-fiction works: "It is in the sterilization of failures, and not in the selection of successes for breeding, that the possibility of an improvement of the human stock lies" (Wells in Galton 1904, 11).

1.5 Evolution, Science and Society in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *The Invisible Man*

Wells's other two early scientific romances suggest different possibilities for the posthuman. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Herbert George Wells [1896] 2005) (hereinafter *IDM*), published the year after *The Time Machine*, dramatizes a central node of Huxleyan and Wellsian post-Darwinism, i.e. the "conflict between the institutions of society and the original animal nature of man" (Williamson 1973, 71). In evolutionary terms, the conflict is played out between the factors promoting (or at least conforming to) the natural selection and the ones impeding it. As Wells explains in "Human Evolution, an Artificial Process",

in civilised man we have (1) an inherited factor, the natural man, who is the product of natural selection, the culminating ape, and a type of animal more obstinately unchangeable than any other living creature; and (2) an acquired factor, the artificial man, the highly plastic creature of tradition, suggestion, and reasoned thought. In the artificial man we have all that makes the comforts and securities of civilisation a possibility. […] And in this view, what we call Morality becomes the padding of suggested emotional habits necessary to keep the round Palaeolithic savage in the square hole of the civilised state. And Sin is the conflict of the two factors – as I have tried to convey in my *Island of Dr. Moreau*. ([1896] 1975, 217)

The romance suggests that the 'reasoned thought' of the civilised man may be equated to – or tainted by – the indifferent and amoral workings of the universe. Moreau, a "white-faced, white-haired" (*IDM*, 79) Victor Frankenstein, vivisections animals to create anthropomorphic hybrids – without being concerned of the moral implications: "To this day I have never troubled about the ethics of the matter […] The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature. I have gone on, not heeding anything but the question I was pursuing" (*IDM*, 75). Somehow anticipating Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Moreau, an educated man of science, reverts to the state of nature he is investigating.[22] This provides him with a deep understanding of the natives, who consider him a god: "I can see through it all, see into their very souls, and see there nothing but the souls of beasts, beasts that perish – anger and the lusts to live and gratify themselves… Yet they're odd. Complex, like everything else alive. There is a kind of upward striving in them, part vanity, part waste sexual emotion, part waste curiosity" (*IDM*, 79).

The grotesque 'beast folk' can be said to simultaneously epitomise the past, the present and the future of humanity – or at least of British society. The first aspect is evident in the folk's animal nature, which always threatens to emerge, and to bring them back to their pre-human status: "First one animal trait, then another, creeps to the surface and stares out at me. […] After all, what is ten years? Men have been a hundred thousand in the making. […] And they revert. As soon as my hand is taken from them the beast begins to creep back, begins to assert itself again" (*IDM*, 78). Furthermore, the "beast people, with their instincts and mental restrictions" (*IDM*, 96), display a series of traits that must have recalled the descriptions of the primitive natives dwelling in the corners of the Empire: uncivilized manners, tribal society, simple language, sexual promiscuity,[23] and even cannibalism. In this regard, *IDM* stages the Victorian perception of the colonial subjects as less evolved, i.e. lower on the evolutionary scale. Not unlike *TM*, it appropriates the tropes of the imperialist romance, in which "space travel becomes

time travel" (Cantor and Hufnagel 2006, 37), and the borders of the Empire are inhabited by primitive human beings.

In addition to being a "parody of the 'white man's burden'" (Parrinder 1995, 57), Moreau's vivisection can be construed as a metaphor of the scientific romance, i.e. a heterogeneous pastiche of different fictional and non-fictional works (see Huntington 1981, 245). Its products, the beast folk, represent in a grotesque manner not only the working class – brutish, albeit necessary –, but also the middle-class readers, with their desire for cultural uplift (Pagetti 1986, 20–21). Prendick considers the hybrids as distorting mirrors, "horrible caricature of my Maker's image" (*IDM*, 97), and he reckons that in their grotesque society he is capable to see "the whole balance of human life in miniature" (95). Wells satirises the Victorian society, detailing "a travesty of human civilisation, including a parody of religion ('the Litany of the Law') and the fear of Hell ('the house of Pain'), monogamous marriage, and a strict code of behaviour and decorum" (Hammond 1979, 85). In particular, Wells's satirical construction seems to be directed at the social institution of religion, and to religious gullibility. In a surprising dialectic of subversion and containment (see S. Greenblatt 1994), Moreau claims to be "a religious man, […] as every sane man must be" (*IDM*, 74), but also that the suppression of sexuality may be channelled into "religious emotion" (73). In order to suppress their lower instincts, the beasts must be kept in awe, and they have to believe into supernatural beings (in their case, Moreau), even in defiance of reality. In front of Moreau's lifeless body, Prendick in fact claims that "he is not dead. […] He has changed his shape – he has changed his body" (103).

In a secluded setting that recalls classic romances and utopias (*The Tempest*, *Gulliver's Travels*), but also the controlled environment of a laboratory, *IDM* poses a research question, namely whether evolution might be achieved in an artificial way. Moreau claims that his goal is "to find out the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape" (75). The same topic had already been discussed by Wells one year before, in an essay aptly entitled "The Limits of Individual Plasticity", which constitutes one the main sources for the romance. Here he sets out to confute the popular belief that "a living thing is at the utmost nothing more than the complete realization of its birth possibilities" (Herbert George Wells [1895] 1975, 36). In order to overcome this natural limits, creatures can be modified, reshaped by surgical interventions, and even new life-forms might be created:

> If we concede the justifications of vivisection, we may imagine as possible in the future, operators, armed with antiseptic surgery and a growing perfection in the knowledge of the laws of growth, taking living creatures and moulding them into the most amazing forms; it may be, even reviving the monsters of mythology, realizing the fantasies of the taxidermist, his mermaids and what-not, in flesh and blood. (38–39)

In addition to 'physical' surgery, hypnotic practices can be used in the process of artificial evolution. In a passage copied *verbatim* from the essay to the novel, Wells/Moreau claims that

> In our growing science of hypnotism we find the promise of a possibility of replacing old inherent instincts by new suggestions, grafting upon or replacing the inherited fixed ideas. Very much indeed of what we call moral education is such an artificial modification and perversion of instinct; pugnacity is trained into courageous self-sacrifice, and suppressed sexuality into pseudo-religious emotion. (Herbert George Wells [1895] 1975, 38–39, [1896] 2005, 73) (the only difference in the two excerpts is that in the novel the final words are "into religious emotion")

The use of hypnosis as a tool of re-education is a recurring motif in Wells's literary production. Transformed in an instrument of patriarchal oppression, it serves as a major plot point in the novella *A Story of the Days to Come* (1899). Here, the female protagonist is brainwashed by his father, with the aid of a trained hypnotist, into marring a bourgeois pretender instead of her lower-class lover. Hypnosis is also widespread in the ambiguously utopian society of *WSW*, where "it had largely superseded drugs, antiseptics and anaesthetics in medicine" (Herbert George Wells [1899] 1978, 436). As Graham discovers, "memories could be effaced, habits removed, and desires eradicated – a sort of psychic surgery was, in fact, in general use" (*ibid.*). The "psychic surgery" metaphor suggests that Wells *de facto* considered hypnotherapy as a 'psychological' equivalent to corporeal manipulation.

In *IDM*, bodily and psychological reprogramming are aimed at creating anthropomorphic animal-hybrids that are, to an extent, enhanced humans. Moreau's "goal is a heroic one, to create a more rational race, less subject to their physical sensations" (Draper 1987, 45). He sets out to eradicate the "mark of the beast", which he identifies in the emotional substratum, "This store which men and women set on pleasure and pain […]. Pain, pain and pleasure, they are for us only so long as we wriggle in the dust" (*IDM*, 74–75). Echoing an 1894 article by Wells, "The Province of Pain", Moreau claims that pain is a vestigial, unnecessary element in the evolutionary process: "men, the more intelligent they become, the more intelligently they will see after their own welfare, and the less they will need the goad to keep them out of danger. I

never yet heard of a useless thing that was not ground out of existence by evolution sooner or later. Did you? And pain gets needless" (*IDM*, 77). However, in spite of the efforts, the vivisectionist is failing in his attempt to create a new humanity, cleansed of the detrimental irrational behaviours.[24] His results are at best dim-witted servants, or at worst uncanny monstrosities – brutish savages, rather than civilised westerners: "the least satisfactory of all is something that I cannot touch, somewhere – I cannot determine where – in the seat of the emotions. Cravings, instincts, desires that harm humanity, a strange hidden reservoir to burst forth suddenly and inundate the whole being of the creature with anger, hate, or fear" (78).

As artificial humanoids, Moreau's creatures reinvigorate the trope of the automaton, popularised with *Frankenstein* or Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *The Future Eve* (1886). In this regard, they epitomise the dream of creating a functioning intelligent replica, a simulacrum testifying man's demiurgic desire. As Moreau explains, "These creatures of mine seemed strange and uncanny to you so soon as you began to observe them, but to me, just after I make them, they seem to be indisputably human beings" (*IDM*, 78). Furthermore, their hybridity somehow anticipates the post- and transhumanist possibilities of twentieth-century sci-fi.[25] They may be seen as prefiguring the cyborgs of cyberpunk literature, in their capacity to combine the technological and the corporeal within a status of subversive otherness. In-between the android's artificiality and the cyborg's heterogeneity, the 'Beast Folk' express a yearning for "humanity's (techno) evolution into a vastly more powerful and longer-lived posthumanity constituted of subjects who may no longer be defined by their vulnerability to the limitations of the flesh" (Hollinger 2009, 268).

Despite the failure of Moreau's project of artificial evolution, the benevolent 'coming man' might still be hiding somewhere. The ending of the romance is optimistic, and the stoic resignation of *TM* seems to have been substituted by a quasi-religious faith into the laws of the universe, and the rationality that lies beneath them:

> My days I devote to reading and to experiments in chemistry, and I spend many of the clear nights in the study of astronomy. There is, though I do not know how there is or why there is, a sense of infinite peace and protection in the glittering hosts of heaven. There it must be, I think, in the vast and eternal laws of matter, and not in the daily cares and sins and troubles of men, that whatever is more than animal within us must find its solace and its hope. (*IDM*, 131)

The same sort of optimism and imagery are also present in a 1902 pamphlet, "The Discovery of the Future", in which Wells speculates on the scientific method of predicting the future and the possible development of humanity. Wells points out that "What is to come after man? is the most persistently fascinating and the most insoluble question in the whole world" (1902, 79), and he concludes by claiming that

> All this world is heavy with the promise of greater things, and a day will come one day in the unending succession of days when beings, beings who are now latent in our thoughts and hidden in our loins, will stand upon this earth as one stands upon a footstool, and laugh, and reach out their hands amidst the stars. (95)

Published the year after *IDM*, *The Invisible Man* (hereinafter *IM*) further develops several motifs of the predecessor. For instance, it analyses the "inner conflict of animal man against social man" (Williamson 1973, 83), once again in a secluded environment – the rural village of Iping, in West Sussex –, and also "the potential complexities inherent in the relationship between scientist and society" (McLean 2009, 66). As Moreau, the "experimental investigator" (Herbert George Wells [1897] 2012, 9) Griffin is (literally) forced to invisibility by a society that is unable to understand his work, and which disdains him from the outset: "whatever they thought of him, people in Iping on the whole agreed in disliking him. His irritability, though it might have been comprehensible to an urban brain-worker, was an amazing thing to these quiet Sussex villagers" (*IM*, 21). In this regard, the novel further develops the theme of the untamed intellect as destructive force (West [1957] 1976, 14), a concept also present in *IDM* and *WWs*.

IM reverses the narrative pattern of *IDM*, in the same way as *WWs* does with *TM*. The "voyage to a new locus" (the London of the year 802,701, the dystopian island of the beast folk) is replaced by a "catalyzer transforming the author's environment to a new locus" (Suvin 1979, 71). Unlike the other early romances, *IM* does not address the topic of posthumanity in a direct manner. However, we can consider Griffin as a mutant being, which epitomises an unlikely – but not unimaginable – evolutionary possibility. His alleged superhumanity is determined by two features: on the one hand, the eponymous invisibility, i.e. a liberating power "which transforms him into a superhuman figure holding an advantage over his species" (Pearson 2007, 65):

> I beheld, unclouded by doubt, a magnificent vision of all that invisibility might mean to a man, – the mystery, the power, the freedom. Drawbacks I saw none. You have only to think!

> And I, a shabby, poverty-struck, hemmed-in demonstrator, teaching fools in a provincial college, might suddenly become – this." (*IM*, 93)

On the other hand, Griffin is said to be an extraordinarily vigorous and irascible man, who overcomes with great ease his assailants: "I am a fairly strong man, and I have the poker handy – besides being invisible. There's not the slightest doubt that I could kill you both and get away quite easily if I wanted to" (*IM*, 54). Later on, a pursuer "was kicked sideways by a blow that might have felled an ox" (58). Throughout the course of the novel, anger and rage are Griffin's defining features, while he is shown to be at the mercy of his most primal instincts: "I had a fit of rage – I could hardly control myself" (120); "I clean lost my temper" (124); "the extraordinary irascibility of the Invisible Man" (137); "in the morning he was himself again, active, powerful, angry, and malignant, prepared for his last great struggle against the world" (138); the 12th chapter is even entitled "The Invisible Man Loses His Temper". Griffin's strength and anger may be partially explained by his use of strychnine, which he defines as "a grand tonic, [able] to take the flabbiness out of a man" (100), but which the morally righteous Kemp (somehow akin to *IDM*'s Prendick) defines as "Palaeolithic in a bottle". After the consumption, Griffin in fact "awoke vastly invigorated and rather irritable" (*ibid.*).[26]

However, "[Griffin's] superhumanity, like the Martians' lack of earthly immunities, is disastrously flawed" (K. Williams 2007, 68). Rather than providing an evolutionary advantage, the condition of invisibility forthwith shows the negative side:

> "But you begin now to realise," said the Invisible Man, "the full disadvantage of my condition. I had no shelter, no covering. To get clothing was to forego all my advantage, to make myself a strange and terrible thing. I was fasting; for to eat, to fill myself with unassimilated matter, would be to become grotesquely visible again." […] I could not go abroad in snow – it would settle on me and expose me. Rain, too, would make me a watery outline, a glistening surface of a man – a bubble. And fog – I should be like a fainter bubble in a fog, a surface, a greasy glimmer of humanity. Moreover, as I went abroad – in the London air – I gathered dirt about my ankles, floating smuts and dust upon my skin. I did not know how long it would be before I should become visible from that cause also. (*IM*, 116)

Griffin is cold, hungry, isolated, for any attempt at satisfying his primal needs – food, clothing – would reveal his presence. In this sense, "Examined within an evolutionary frame, his corporeal invisibility constitutes a downward adaptation" (McLean 2009, 80). He wonders what might be the best use for his useless power: "The more I thought it over, Kemp, the more

I realised what a helpless absurdity an Invisible Man was […]. What was I to do? And for this I had become a wrapped-up mystery, a swathed and bandaged caricature of a man!" (*IM*, 124). In the end, he realises that the only meaningful way in which he can relate to humanity is to become the caricature of a ruthless dictator. As he proclaims, speaking in third person,

> that Invisible Man, Kemp, must now establish a Reign of Terror. Yes – no doubt it's startling. But I mean it. A Reign of Terror. He must take some town like your Burdock and terrify and dominate it. He must issue his orders. He can do that in a thousand ways – scraps of paper thrust under doors would suffice. And all who disobey his orders he must kill, and kill all who would defend the disobedient. (*IM*, 128)

This puerile speech demonstrates that Wells, before conceiving the positive *übermensch*, invented the supervillain. As Coogan suggests, the "*Homo superior* [in *IM*] is monstrous and alien, incapable of existing in peace or equilibrium with *Homo sapiens*" (2006, 129). Moreover, Griffin is not merely the (by-)product of evolution, for he is the one who created the technology to trigger it. He is both Dr. Moreu *and* the beast folk, "Frankenstein and Monster at the same time" (Suvin 1979, 214). The societal failure is twofold, and "the young scientist who might have helped facilitate the union of mankind is now a monstrous Other" (McLean 2009, 85).

The only cognitive leap left to the character is to embrace his own whimsical villainy, for he does not appear to have alternatives: "Ambition – what is the good of pride of place when you cannot appear there? What is the good of the love of woman when her name must needs be Delilah? I have no taste for politics, for the blackguardisms of fame, for philanthropy, for sport" (*IM*, 124). To a certain extent, Griffin's words and intentions recall the ones of another villainous character of the English canon, albeit of a different stature. He can in fact be seen as the grotesque parody of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, who actually manages to establish a Reign of Terror, and who in a similar fashion claims, "And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days" (Shakespeare 2009, 1.1.28-31). However, Griffin does not meet his fate in a grand, epic battle. He is instead beaten to death by an angry mob, in a melee that assumes the traits of a sport match: "In another second there was a simultaneous rush upon the struggle, and a stranger coming into the road suddenly might have thought an exceptionally savage game of Rugby football was in progress. And there was no shouting after Kemp's cry, – only a sound of blows and feet and heavy breathing" (*IM*, 152). As happens with the Eloi-Morlocks, the inferior being turns into predator (Suvin 1979, 213).

In the aforementioned monologue of Griffin's, the scientist employs the term "blackguardism". It is worth noting that, in the same year of *IM*, Wells also uses the term in an article on evolutionism, published in *Nature*: "The tendency of a belief in natural selection as the main factor of human progress, is, in the moral field, toward the glorification of a sort of rampant egotism – of blackguardism in fact – as the New Gospel. You get that in the Gospel of Nietzsche" (Wells quoted in Bridgwater 1972, 56). Here, the association between "blackguardism", "egotism" and "Nietzsche" might confirm the alleged influence of the German philosopher on the narrative construction of *IM*. As Steven McLean suggests, "modern critics have identified a possible Nietzschean influence in [Griffin's] contempt for the 'common conventions of humanity'" (2009, 84; see also Cantor 1999, 99)[27]. In this sense, the character's nakedness may be seen as an affront to the Victorian standards morality and decency. It signifies his "*otherness*, the departure from the accepted norms of behaviour" (Hammond 1979, 90; see also Batchelor 1985, 30).

Besides the legitimacy of a Nietzschean reading, it seems evident that Wells conceived the romance as a moral fable, in order to outline the dangers individualism. Griffin is "pure selfishness" (*IM*, 131), as he wastes his scientific talent first by not disseminating the ideas – "I simply would not publish" (93) –, and later by "playing a game against the race" (128). As Keith Williams points out, "Griffin's science is egotistical, not philanthropic. He jealously hoards his knowledge, encoding it in cipher. This means that his experiments succeed only at the cost of complete detachment from common humanity, from which there is no return" (2007, 66). In this regard, the romance articulates the tension between individuality and individualism that informs much of Wells's literary production, and especially the later utopias.[28] As a non-Marxist socialist, Wells rejected the ethical and economical individualism of Herbert Spencer, who "was adamant that humanity could not escape the model of competition between individuals suggested by nature" (McLean 2009, 4; see also Vallorani 1996a, 34). In his autobiography, Wells is explicit in his criticism of Spencer: "We do but emerge now from a period of deliberate happy-go-lucky and the influence of Herbert Spencer, who came near raising public shiftlessness to the dignity of a national philosophy" ([1934] 1984, 664).[29] To oppose rampant individualism and egotism, Wells suggests an alternative social model based on cooperation.[30] He claims that the blueprint for mutual collaboration is already present in the natural world, and men should only follow the example: "this element of individual competition is over-accentuated in current though, and that not only human sentiment, but the great mother

of humanity, Nature, has her sanction for self-sacrifice, and her own abundant recognition of the toiler and of the martyr" ([1892] 1975, 188).

In the diatribe of individualism *versus* collectivism, Wells thus leans towards the latter. Nonetheless, he warns against the loss of individuality that certain socialist utopianism seems to entail. As he points out in *A Modern Utopia* (hereinafter *MU*), "[utopias'] common fault is to be comprehensively jejune. That which is the blood and warmth and reality of life is largely absent; there are no individualities, but only generalised people" ([1905] 2005, 13–14; see also Kumar 1987, 192–93). To Wells, detrimental individualism may arise when subjective and personal specificities are not taken into account: "So long as we ignore difference, so long as we ignore individuality, and that I hold has been the common sin of all Utopias hitherto, we can make absolute statements, prescribe communisms or individualisms, and all sorts of hard theoretic arrangements" (*MU*, 31). This "common sin" of depersonalisation is a facet of what Jameson identifies as "that fundamental anxiety of Utopia […], namely the fear of losing that familiar world in which all our vices and virtues are rooted (very much including the very longing for Utopia itself) in exchange for a world in which all these things and experiences - positive as well as negative - will have been obliterated" (2005, 97).

A syncretism between individuality and para-socialist anti-individualism lies at the core of the alternate reality of *Men Like Gods*, in which the graceful utopians live according to a sort of 'individualised socialism'. As the earthling narrator sums up,

> I begin to apprehend the daily life of this world," said Mr. Barnstaple. "It is a life of demi-gods, very free, strongly individualized, each following an individual bent, each contributing to great racial ends. It is not only cleanly naked and sweet and lovely but full of personal dignity. It is, I see, a practical communism, planned and led up to through long centuries of education and discipline and collectivist preparation. I had never thought before that socialism could exalt and ennoble the individual and individualism degrade him, but now I see plainly that here the thing is proved. In this fortunate world – it is indeed the crown of all its health and happiness – there is no Crowd. The old world, the world to which I belong, was and in my universe alas still is, the world of the Crowd, the world of that detestable crawling mass of unfeatured, infected human beings. (Herbert George Wells [1923] 1976, 203)

In addition to the classic Wellsian distaste for the masses (see Suvin 1979, 212), the passage describes *Men Like God*'s vision of utopia, i.e. an idyllic, pseudo-anarchic (for there is no formal government or hierarchy) collectivism that manages to preserve the "individual bent". The homogeneous working class disappears, and an illuminated bourgeoisie extends all over

humanity (Kumar 1987, 218). Men and women are free to pursue their happiness, provided that they put their individual specificity at the service of the race.

In *IM* such a conciliatory view cannot be achieved. The romance stages the conflict between the egotistic animal man, i.e. the evolutionary champion, and the repressive mediocrity of society. As Jack Williamson points out, "Griffin illustrates the paradox that the impulse toward advancement springs from a regressive animal individualism rather than from the social nature that makes us human. Social institutions are, in fact, necessarily conservative; only the individual intellect can initiate progressive change" (1973, 87).[31] Nevertheless, Griffin's effort is here misdirected towards the institution of a dystopian "Reign of Terror". The logic is linear: individualism produces innovation, innovation produces death. In the post-Darwinian framework of the tale, the *novum* is (used as) an instrument of oppression, to dominate and eliminate the inferior ones. To avoid extinction, the Sussex villagers are to form a coalition, "The whole countryside must begin hunting and keep hunting" (IM, *132*). They soon turn into a 'crawling mass of unfeatured human beings': "There was a pushing and a shuffling, a sound of heavy feet as fresh people turned up to increase the pressure of the crowd" (153). Like a modern Cronus, the ignorant humanity eventually devours its talented, egoistic son.

The power of the individual to produce change and reshape society is given a eutopian gloss in Wells's later works. For instance, in *MU* the Owner of the Voice argues that "The factor that leads the World State on from one phase of development to the next is the interplay of individualities; to speak teleologically, the world exists for the sake of and through initiative, and individuality is the method of initiative" (*MU*, 64). Later on, he suggests that "In the initiative of the individual above the average, lies the reality of the future, which the State, presenting the average, may subserve but cannot control" (126). Wells's fascination for the "individual above the average" is omnipresent in his literary production, and proves to be particularly problematic in the writer's formulation of socialism and utopianism (see Vallorani 1996a, 40). In *The Discovery of the Future*, he acknowledges that the very notion of 'great man' impedes a scientific extrapolation of the 'things to come':

> an exceptional man comes into the world, a Cæsar or a Napoleon or a Peter the Hermit, and he appears to persuade and convince and compel and take entire possession of the sand heap – I mean the community – and to twist and alter its destinies to an almost unlimited extent. And if this is indeed the case, it reduces our project of an inductive knowledge of the future to very small limits. (1902, 64–65).

Rather than the supermen *per se*, Wells here suggest that we should take into account the historical dynamics underlying those figures: "I believe that these great men of ours are no more than images and symbols and instruments taken, as it were, haphazard by the incessant and consistent forces behind them" (67). In this regard, Wells's first positive *übermensch*, i.e. *WSW*'s Graham, represents the impossible marriage of superhumanity and utopian socialism, which stands as "consistent force" behind him. Griffin, instead, chooses individualism. He is Graham's foil, his antithetical prototype.

In Wells's early scientific romances, the different evolutionary patterns produce posthuman monstrosities that embody the conflict between evolution and ethics. At the same time, the texts stage the tension between science and society, which problematizes the position of the scientist-intellectual within the epistemological break of the late nineteenth century. As Suvin puts it, "H. G. Wells's first and most significant SF cycle (roughly to 1904) is based on the vision of a horrible novum as the evolutionary sociobiological prospect for mankind" (1979, 208). However, the idea that the superhuman may serve as an instrument of social improvement starts emerging at the very end of this cycle. In *The Discovery of the Future* Wells may have dismissed the importance of the 'great men', but in the subsequent *The Future in America* he claims that "much may be foretold as certain, much more as possible, but the last decisions and the greatest decisions, lie in the hearts and wills of unique incalculable men" (Herbert George Wells 1906, 10–11; see also Parrinder 1995, 30).

This conceptual shift, also seen in *MU*, is coeval with Wells's "desire […] to establish his credentials as a serious sociological essayist" (Parrinder 1995, 27). As the writer enters the second phase of his career, the faith in biology (and in the other hard sciences) is juxtaposed (and to a certain extent substituted) by a growing interest in secular humanism and sociology (see Vallorani 1996a, 30). Through these new theoretical instruments, he elaborates a novel way to translate into fiction one of his oldest tenets, i.e. the societal need for an "unauthorised body of workers, […], shaping the minds and acts and destinies of men (Herbert George Wells [1897] 1975, 228).[32] As Philmus and Hughes point out,

> The shift to scientific humanism meant, for Wells, dropping the issue of whether biology justifies us in believing man to be by "nature" a beast or a starry portent, and instead taking up – in his histories, Utopias, forecasts, and social novels – the issue of man in society, in order to illuminate the workings of man's social and individual adaptive functions. Darwinism for Wells had always been a way of thinking rather than primarily a body of facts, and now he was able, with a sense of active implementation, to use the evolutionary model in areas other than biology (1975b, 185).

This theoretical framework influences in a significant way his work as a writer and intellectual. In accordance with his novel "responsibilities as a public figure" (Draper 1987, 4), and within his newly-acquired "position of critical engagement" (*ibid.*), Wells can no longer rely on the "monstrous experimental imaginings of children" (Herbert George Wells 1906, 7) seen in his early romances. As a futurologist, he feels the need to become "more systematic" (8), and to extrapolate a vision of the future from the contemporary trends, like he does in *Anticipations* (1901). As a utopist, he must conceive a way to ameliorate that vision,[33] for it "is our purpose, to imagine our best and strive for it" (*MU*, 19). In this regard, *WSW* first introduces the possibility that the superhuman might represent the *deus ex machina* to guide man towards utopia, the figure able to shape "minds and acts and destinies". For all his flaws, Graham is the first specimen of "some form of species 'mutation' to avoid zoological retrogression and ensure survival" (Parrinder 1995, 63). At the turn of the century, Wells puts forward the hypothesis that the 'Coming Beast' may actually be the saviour of humanity. However, this means that man is to erase the mark of the beast.

1.6 "Mad distortions of humanity": The Mechanism of Deanthropization in Wells's Scientific Romances

In his early science fiction, Wells's formulation of superhumanity – and the utopian implications thereof – is underpinned by two intertwined discourses, the posthuman (what comes after man) and the non-human (what is different from or less than man). In this regard, a narrative and aesthetic mechanism of deanthropization represents the epiphenomenal, dialectical opposite of the evolutionary process. The outlook of evolving into something 'after the human' is thus accompanied by the constant fear of losing the distinctive traits of humanity, of becoming (or being superseded by) something else. As Wells writes, "man, unless the order of the universe has come to an end, will undergo further modification in the future, and at last cease to be man, giving rise to some other type of animated being" (1898, 162–63). We (will) disappear, decentred and replaced by a variously xenomorphic *novum* (the Martians, the beast folks, etc.), which nonetheless retains the uncanniness of a partial humanity. In addition, the process of deanthrophization described in Wells's romances is not limited to the posthuman

entity. The reversion is in fact revealed to be contagious, and the human-alien contact spreads a pattern of ethical and/or physical retrogression in the Victorian "false bourgeois idyll" (Suvin 1979, 217). The romances thus express the generalised anxiety of becoming 'other', of 'going native',[34] of reverting to the uncivilised state of the evolutionary monster.

The estranging mechanism of deanthropization is rooted in the very patterns of the evolutionary process. Darwinism has demonstrated that 'man' is no longer a stable ontological category, and there is no certainty that the future dominant species will be anthropomorphic: "It is part of the excessive egotism of the human animal that the bare idea of its extinction seems incredible to it" (Herbert George Wells 1898, 172). In his early scientific writings, Wells contemplates this eventuality with stoic and detached resignation:

> It is as much beyond dispute that the possibility of the utter extinction of humanity, or its extensive modification into even such strange forms as we have hinted at, human trees with individuals as their branches and so forth, is as imperatively admissible in science as it is repugnant to the imagination (Herbert George Wells [1892] 1975, 192).

Here the grotesque "human tree" is a viable – and somehow more preferable – alternative to the unsympathetic "Man of Year Million", the tentacled creature seen in *WWs*.

Furthermore, it can be speculated that the process of deanthropisation in Wells's romances also reflects the epistemological discontinuities of the late nineteenth century. As Vallorani (1996a, 19–29, 1996b, 283–84) suggests, the publication of *On the Origin of Species* – and of Darwin's following works – had profound consequences on the shared discourse of science. Rejecting Baconian inductivism in favour of hypotheses and theory, Darwin's texts in fact contributed to the paradigmatic revision that invested the representational processes of both science and fiction (Levine 1988, 2).[35] While the romance began to embrace the modes of scientific speculation, science itself started being narrativised, and informed by "preconceptions established without scientific verification" (6). As Wells points out, "The great advances made by Darwin and his school in biology were not made, it must be remembered, by the scientific method, as it is generally conceived, at all" (Herbert George Wells 1914, 198). At the same time, the scientist was losing the privileged position of impartial and objective eyewitness. The progressive crisis of scientific observation as an instrument to produce a stable knowledge of the world would culminate, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in Albert Einstein's Theories of Relativity, which questioned the independence of the basic categories of space and

time, and in the new field of quantum mechanics, which overcame the limitations of classical physics, while reconfiguring the role of the observer in the scientific process. The limits of science and the perceptual relativism are a leitmotif in Wells's literary production. He had introduced the themes in "The Rediscovery of the Unique", his first published article, in which he employs a metaphor that would return in *TM*:

> science is a match that man has just got alight. He thought he was in a room - in moments of devotion, a temple - and that his light would be reflected from and display walls inscribed with wonderful secrets and pillars carved with philosophical systems wrought into harmony. It is a curious sensation, now that the preliminary splutter is over and the flame burns up clear, to see his hands lit and just a glimpse of himself and the patch he stands on visible, and around him, in place of all that human comfort and beauty he anticipated - darkness still. (Herbert George Wells [1891a] 1975, 30–31)

In addition to blurring the line between the realms of factuality and fictionality, the theory of evolution removed the human being as the metaphysical centre of knowledge. As a precarious entity, which has only recently started to exist, and which is likely to disappear, 'man' can no longer serve as the measure of all things. As Wells's early romances display, the epistemological decentring undermines the presumption of anthropocentrism, and the possibility for a religious or secular *telos* (see Philmus and Hughes 1975b, 7–8)[36]. In this regard,

> Darwin's ideas displaced humanity from the spiritual center of the universe […]. Humanity thus loses its special standing, becoming no different from other multicelled organisms, and God is eliminated as the prime mover of the universe. Without God as the motive force behind creation, we lose our humanity – which is based in original sin – and become like Satan, agents of our own will without moral check on our actions. (Coogan 2006, 131)

Whereas an anthropocentric *episteme* is no longer viable, the validity and almost universal applicability of the method becomes the very foundation for the scientific discourse (Vallorani 1996a, 25–29). Man is therefore decentred, and the experimental process of the 'new' science serves as a buffer between the sensible reality and the textual abstraction of the scientific paper. Wells himself is aware of this epistemological revision, which influences his fiction and non-fiction writings (see Busch 2009, 86). As he suggests in the essay "On Comparative Theology," "The immense impetus given to knowledge by the experimental method has now finally carried scientific certitude in many directions beyond the reach of experimental verification" (Herbert George Wells [1898] 1975, 45). However, his allegiance to

the scientific method does not prevent him from criticising dogmatic applications in the social sciences. In "The So-called Science of Sociology" he in fact attacks August Comte's and Herbert Spencer's positivist approach to the discipline, and he claims that "no sociology of universal compulsion, of anything approaching the general validity of the physical sciences, is ever to be hoped for" (1914, 200–201). According to Wells, "what is called the scientific method is the method of ignoring individualities; and, like many mathematical conventions, its great practical convenience is no proof whatever of its final truth" (197–98).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the scientific method also emerges as cognitive basis for the literary hybridization of science and romance. As George Levine points out, "Science enters most Victorian fiction not so much in the shape of ideas, as, quite literally, in the shape of its shape, its form, as well as in the patterns it exploits and develops, the relationships it allows" (1988, 13). Thus, rather than paradigms, notions and interpretations, it is the experimental procedure that functions as a conceptual underpinning for the process of estrangement in science fiction. In other words, "the novum is postulated on and validated by the post-Cartesian and post-Baconian scientific *method*" (Suvin 1979, 64–65, emphasis in the original). In this regard, "if the novum is the necessary condition of SF (differentiating it from naturalistic fiction), the validation of the novelty by scientifically methodical cognition into which the reader is inexorably led is the *sufficient* condition for SF" (*ibid.*, 65–66).

It can be therefore argued that the epistemological decentring of man codetermines – along with evolutionism – the process of deanthropization in Wells's early scientific romances. These texts dramatize the tension between a hermeneutical model which puts 'man' at the centre of its focus, and the very crisis of 'man' as stable ontological category. The interplay of these modes of representation also explains the anthropomorphic bias that underpins the encounter between the 'bourgeoisie tranquillity' and the 'alien monstrosity'. This cognitive fallacy resonates with the sensory ambiguity: not only is observation *per se* a vulnerable and subjective process (Vallorani 1996a, 20), but it is also tainted by the narcissistic assumption that the other should be similar to us. The decisive *anagnorisis* is thus invariably postponed or even impeded. At least at the beginning of the stories, Wells's human and variously scientific observers are unable to produce a correct understanding of reality. They are characterised by their failure to recognise the 'alien novum' as such, which is thus to be domesticated via already established discourses of otherness.

The interaction of all these dynamics is evident in *TM*. The Time Traveller presupposes that the future humans he is about to meet will have evolved for the better: "What strange developments of humanity, what wonderful advances upon our rudimentary civilization, I thought, might not appear when I came to look nearly into the dim elusive world that raced and fluctuated before my eyes" (*TM*, 20). However, when he sees the Eloi, and later the Morlocks, he realises to have encountered "two new breeds of not-quite men" (Williamson 1973, 51). In this regard, the *romance* stages the fallacy of teleological anthropocentrism, a point already discussed by Wells in his early scientific writings: "These days are the days of man's triumph. [...] We think always with reference to men. The future is full of men to our preconceptions, whatever it may be in scientific truth" (Herbert George Wells [1893] 1975, 171).

When faced with the unfathomable otherness of the non-human, the prototypical Wellsian protagonist resorts to hermeneutical categories borrowed from his own empirical framework (Cantor and Hufnagel 2006, 46). The ideological connotation of the conceptual metaphors signifies the creatures' difference from the norm, epitomised by the healthy, rational, male investigator. The Eloi are described as sickly, effeminate and childish: "He struck me as being a very beautiful and graceful creature, but indescribably frail. His flushed face reminded me of the more beautiful kind of consumptive – that hectic beauty of which we used to hear so much" (*TM*, 23). However, the Eloi's non-threatening features allow the Traveller to establish a bond with them, as he is sure of his utter superiority: "Indeed, there was something in these pretty little people that inspired confidence – a graceful gentleness, a certain childlike ease. And besides, they looked so frail that I could fancy myself flinging the whole dozen of them about like ninepins" (24). Compared to the Morlocks, they are 'less non-human': "the Eloi had kept too much of the human form not to claim my sympathy, and to make me perforce a sharer in their degradation and their Fear" (62).

The Morlocks, on the other hand, frustrate any attempt at anthropocentrism. The Traveller cannot but register them as monstrous beasts (Bergonzi 1976c, 49; Parrinder 1995, 60). He first catches a glimpse of "some greyish animal" (*TM*, 43). Then he claims that "up the hill I thought I could see ghosts" (44). Here the scientific observer faces the limitations of his own sensorial perception. The certainty is gone, and the irrational, the gothic, the romance breaks into the system of representation. Soon enough, he returns to the initial animal hypothesis: "Twice I fancied I saw a solitary white, ape-like creature running rather quickly up the hill" (*ibid*.). During the course of the novel, the Morlocks are variously described as a harmful pest,

"whitened Lemurs, this new vermin" (51);[37] as grotesque hybrids – prefiguring Moreau's Beast People –, "human spider" (46), "human rats" (74); even as objects, "this Thing" (46), "white Things of which I went in terror" (61). To a certain extent, their non-humanity forecasts the "monstrous crab-like creature" (83) the Traveller encounters at the end of the novel, and even the indescribable, pro-Lovecraftian "moving thing upon the shoal" (85) that he sees thirty million years into the future.

Critics have scrutinised the ways in which Wells employs the colonial imagery and stereotypes of the late-Victorian era to describe the relationship between the Traveller and the future earthlings (Cantor and Hufnagel 2006; McLean 2009, 38). The appropriation of this exogenous discourse signifies Wells's "creative preoccupation with the idea of otherness as determining the self-image of humanity" (Pordzik 2012, 144). In this sense, the Eloi/Morlocks dyad can be said to epitomise the "*binary structure* of the stereotype" (Hall 2013, 252) within a racialized regime of representation. The Eloi embody the fantasy of a submissive, non-threatening simpleton, with whom socialise or even crossbreed. On the other hand, the Morlocks typify the monstrous and violent savages that oppose (and possibly cannibalise) the coloniser. The unsettling gaze of the savage reciprocates the coloniser's anthropological scrutiny:

> A pair of eyes, luminous by reflection against the daylight without, was watching me out of the darkness.
> 'The old instinctive dread of wild beasts came upon me. I clenched my hands and steadfastly looked into the glaring eyeballs. I was afraid to turn. (*TM*, 45)

Whereas the Morlocks and Eloi are depicted as natives, "Wells developed the character of the Time Traveller according to the standard pattern of the intrepid Victorian explorer" (Cantor and Hufnagel 2006, 44). He feels an immediate sense of superiority, both physical and psychological. He selects a female savage to be his companion, as a hybrid between a lover and a pet: "She always seemed to me, I fancy, more human than she was, perhaps because her affection was so human" (*TM*, 64). Since his early attempts at communicating are frustrating,[38] the Traveller decides to learn the natives' language, which appears to be rather elementary: "There seemed to be few, if any, abstract terms, or little use of figurative language. Their sentences were usually simple and of two words, and I failed to convey or understand any but the simplest propositions" (39).

Eventually, the mechanism of deanthropisation that produces the Eloi/Morlocks savages is reflected in the Traveller. The main character epitomises the anxiety of 'going native', for he soon starts sharing several traits with the (two breeds of) natives. First, he loses his temper for the loss of the Time Machine, and "[bawls] like an angry child" (36). Then, his initial fear to be mistaken as a "some old-world savage animal" (22) is confirmed by the brutal violence he uses against the 'things of darkness' (see McLean 2009, 36–38): "And I longed very much to kill a Morlock or so. Very inhuman, you may think, to want to go killing one's own descendants! But it was impossible, somehow, to feel any humanity in the things" (*TM*, 67). At the climax of the novel, he goes on a killing spree – "At first I did not realize their blindness, and struck furiously at them with my bar, in a frenzy of fear, as they approached me, killing one and crippling several more" (75) –, before the fire he has brought exterminates (almost) all the brutes: "Thrice I saw Morlocks put their heads down in a kind of agony and rush into the flames" (76). The contamination – and the regression to a pre-civilized status – is confirmed once the Traveller finally returns to the present, an event narrated at the beginning of the novel. He is in fact described as sharing some traits with the Morlocks: he has "grey eyes" (3); his visage is "ghastly pale" (13); he seems to be "dazzled by the light" (*ibid.*); he craves for "a bit of meat" (14), a desire which recalls the creatures' cannibalism (see Hammond 1979, 80; Pearson 2007, 73–74).

Wells's following romance, *IDM*, stages in a similar way the tension between anthropocentrism and deanthropisation, presenting the relationship between a bourgeoisie observer and the alien novum. At the same time, the novel further explores a motif introduced in the predecessor, i.e. the limitations of sensory perceptions impeding a straightforward, scientific understanding of the Other (see Vallorani 1996b). Prendick's very first encounter with the Beast People, during the rescue operations, introduces both the creatures' unknowability and the tale's horrific undertones: "I also had a disconnected impression of a dark face with extraordinary eyes close to mine, but that I thought was a nightmare, until I met it again" (*IDM*, 9). Later on, Prendick has the chance to refine his perception, and he gives a detailed description of

a misshapen man, short, broad, and clumsy, with a crooked back, a hairy neck, and a head sunk between his shoulders. He was dressed in dark-blue serge, and had peculiarly thick, coarse, black hair. […]. He turned with animal swiftness.
The black face thus flashed upon me startled me profoundly. The facial part projected, forming something dimly suggestive of a muzzle, and the huge half-open mouth showed

as big white teeth as I had ever seen in a human mouth. His eyes were blood-shot at the edges, with scarcely a rim of white round the hazel pupils. There was a curious glow of excitement in his face. (9)

Even though the narrator recognises some animal traits – the "muzzle", the "animal swiftness" –, the idea that the creature might not be a human being is not considered. The accuracy of the description implies a scientific attempt at construing reality, and serves as a proof of the narrator's reliability: "Prendick's close attentiveness to physiognomy is a requirement of the narrative method, since the reader collaborates with him in interpreting the nightmare appearance of the creatures on the island" (Batchelor 1985, 19). Later, Prendick starts perceiving with greater clarity the ineffable diversity of these 'men'. He asks Montgomery: "'Where did you pick the creature up? […] He's unnatural,' I said. 'There's something about him […] Your men on the beach,' said I; 'What race are they?'" (*IDM*, 37).

In the ninth chapter, the encounter with several creatures in their habitat, the wilderness, demonstrates the increasing unreliability of Prendick's sensory perception (Vallorani 1996b, 285–86). In particular, he claims to see "something – at first I could not distinguish what it was," (*IDM*, 39–40), which immediately after he identifies as "a man, going on all-fours like a beast" (40). Then it defines it as a "Thing" (43) and, at the end, nothing more than an unfathomable "black heap" (47). Like the Morlocks, the creature attempts to establish "a disturbing eye-contact" (Parrinder 1995, 59; see also McLean 2009, 52–53): "He tried to meet my gaze. 'No!' he said suddenly, and turning, went bounding away from me through the undergrowth. Then he turned and stared at me again. His eyes shone brightly out of the dusk under the trees" (*IDM*, 43). As in *TM*, the scrutiny of the observer is reciprocated by the gaze of the observed. The sign of bestiality lies in the creature's eyes: "First one animal trait, then another, creeps to the surface and stares out at me" (78). However, unlike the previous romance, the uncanniness of the Beast Folk is further increased by their own ability to speak (see McLean 46–48). This seems to confirm the validity of Prendick's anthropocentric bias: "I did not feel the same repugnance towards this creature that I had experienced in my encounters with the other Beast Men. 'You,' he said, 'in the boat.' He was a man, then – at least as much of a man as Montgomery's attendant – *for he could talk*" (54–55, emphasis added). In another occasion, the main character hears "groaning, broken by sobs and gasps of anguish. It was no brute this time. It was a human being in torment!" (51).

In a similar fashion to *TM*, Prendick becomes increasingly inquisitive about the island and its inhabitants. He asks himself "What could it mean? A locked enclosure on a lonely island, a notorious vivisector, and these crippled and distorted men?..." (35). He then starts questioning the nature of the strange humanoids he has been seeing: "'Montgomery,' said I, 'what was that thing that came after me. Was it a beast, or was it a man?'" (49). He experiences cognitive dissonance, for he cannot reconcile the creatures' anthropomorphism with "the strangest air about them of some familiar animal" (42). In spite of his efforts, the preliminary conclusion reached by Prendick is erroneous:

> I was convinced now, absolutely assured, that Moreau had been vivisecting a human being. All the time since I had heard his name, I had been trying to link in my mind in some way the grotesque animalism of the islanders with his abominations; and now I thought I saw it all. The memory of his work on the transfusion of blood recurred to me. These creatures I had seen were the victims of some hideous experiment! (52)

Only Moreau, the scientific demiurge, has the authority to shed light on the experiments carried out in the "House of Pain". As he explains in a clumsy attempt at Latinate solemnity, "*Hi non sunt omines, sunt animalia qui nos habemus…* Vivisected. A humanising process" (67). Here, the lexical choices imply the dialectical opposite of the 'humanising process', i.e. the mechanism of deanthropisation. The human-animal and the non-human are superimposed in the grotesque *métis*, whose inbetweenness epitomises the ontological precariousness of man, and suggests new forms of technological embodiment (see Hollinger 2009, 273).

IDM further explores the colonial undertones introduced in the predecessor, merging the hybrid sci-fi genre with the formulas of the imperialist romance (Parrinder 1995, 57; Cantor and Hufnagel 2006, 51–54). The appropriation of the colonial imagery serves two different purposes: one the one hand, it is evoked to illustrate the way in which different stages of evolution coexist in the creatures, being at the same time primitive savages and posthuman monsters; on the other hand, it is employed as negative term to signify the Beast People's unintelligible otherness. Soon after his arrival on the island, Prendick reflects upon "the indefinable queerness of the deformed and white-swathed man on the beach" (33). In particular, he recalls "that none of these men had spoken to me, though most of them I had found looking at me at one time or another in a peculiarly furtive manner, quite unlike the frank stare of your unsophisticated savage" (*ibid*.). Later, when he sees the "Thing in the forest", he points out that "the man I had just seen had been clothed in bluish cloth, had not been naked as a savage would

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have been, and I tried to persuade myself from that fact that he was after all probably a peaceful character, that the dull ferocity of his countenance belied him. Yet I was greatly disturbed at the apparition" (40). Afterward, he sees three Beast Folk engaged in a weird ritual, and observes that "They were naked, save for swathings of scarlet cloth about the middles, and their skins were of a dull pinkish drab colour, such as I had seen in no savages before" (41).

As Wells's most sustained interrogation of essentialist humanism (see Clarke 2008, 54–59), *IDM* explores, and then erases, the ontological distance between the man and its simulacrum. The anxiety of 'going native', merely suggested in *TM*, is here made explicit. However, it is worth pointing out that the two romances differ in a significant way in the initial condition of the narrator/protagonist. The Time Traveller is introduced in a bourgeois domestic environment, a "luxurious after-dinner atmosphere", in which he "was expounding a recondite matter to us" (*TM*, 3). There is a fireplace, and the atmosphere is cosy and sophisticated. Prendick, on the other hand, is shown in a dingey – in the immediate aftermath of a shipwreck –, where he and "his fellow survivors almost succumb to cannibalism" (Parrinder 1995, 58). After the rescue on the Ipecacuanha, he is given by Montgomery "a dose of some scarlet stuff, iced", which "tasted like blood, and made me feel stronger" (*IDM*, 10). To a certain extent, Prendick is tainted, hence doomed to retrogression, since the very beginning. In the latter half of the novel, he acknowledges the deanthropizing mechanism of racial contamination: "I too must have undergone strange changes. My clothes hung about me as yellow rags, through whose rents showed the tanned skin. My hair grew long, and became matted together. I am told that even now my eyes have a strange brightness, a swift alertness of movement" (124). The ontological-symbolical divide between the scientific observer and the observed savage is erased. Once capable of producing phrenological descriptions, the eyes have now reverted to the animal brightness of the primitive other. After his escape from the island, Prendick realises that his retrogressive mutation is permanent: "I was almost as queer to men as I had been to the Beast People. I may have caught something of the natural wildness of my companions" (130). In the Swiftian ending, in which the narrator expresses his newly-acquired distaste for humanity (Kumar 1987, 184), the process of deanthropisation seems to have infected the domestic and bourgeoisie dimension of the writer/reader :

> My trouble took the strangest form. I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls; and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark and then that. […]

> I see faces, keen and bright, others dull or dangerous, others unsteady, insincere; none that have the calm authority of a reasonable soul. I feel as though the animal was surging up through them; that presently the degradation of the Islanders will be played over again on a larger scale. I know this is an illusion, that these seeming men and women about me are indeed men and women, men and women for ever, perfectly reasonable creatures, full of human desires and tender solicitude, emancipated from instinct and the slaves of no fantastic Law – beings altogether different from the Beast Folk. (*IDM*, 130)

IDM's emphasis on the Other's embodied presence – the flesh, the blood – is literally absent from Wells's following romance, *IM*. The self-appointed prototerrist Griffin is an empty signifier, a sort of walking oxymoron which conveys the virtuality of technological disembodiment. The crisis of perception reaches here its peak, for the civilised observer faces an object that escapes any form of observation (McLean 2009, 72). In this symbolic space of sensory uncertainty, the tension between deanthropisation and anthropocentric bias is once again represented by the clash of the late-Victorian hermeneutical categories with the alienness of the *novum*. Once faced with the unknowability of the masked figure, the bigoted villagers start investigating Griffin's identity, "a space into which [they] project anxieties and prejudice about difference and folk demons of all kinds" (K. Williams 2007, 65; see also McLean 2009, 69–71). Soon after the "Strange Man's arrival" to the Coach and Horses, Mrs Hall (the inn's proprietor) deduces from the bandages that "The poor souls's had an accident or an op'ration of something", and that "Perhaps his mouth was hurt too" (*IM*, 4). Then, as the villager turn their suspicion into overt antipathy, the 'medical hypothesis' is replaced by racial anxiety. Mr Fearnside in fact claims

> I seed through the tear of his trousers and the tear of his glove. You'd have expected a sort of pinky to show, wouldn't you? Well – there wasn't none. Just blackness. I tell you, he's as black as my hat. […]
> That marn's a piebald, Teddy. Black here and white there – in patches. And he's ashamed of it. He's a kind of half-breed, and the colour's come off patchy instead of mixing. I've heard of such things before. And it's the common way with horses, as any one can see. (17–18)

Later, it is suggested that the man "was a criminal trying to escape from justice by wrapping himself up so as to conceal himself altogether from the eye of the police" (20), and even that "the stranger was an Anarchist in disguise, preparing explosive" (20–21). Eventually, a supernatural hypothesis gains popularity among the villagers, via the well-established Wellsian mechanism through which the scientific cognition is jeopardised by the Gothic

irrationality of the romance. Women and children, as predictable, are more prone to non-scientific modes of reasoning: "Sussex folk have few superstitions, and it was only after the events of early April that the thought of the supernatural was first whispered in the village. Even then it was only credited among the women folk" (21); "Also belated little children would call 'Bogey Man!' after him, and make off tremendously elated" (22). The dislike or fear toward Griffin is caused by the stranger's bad temper – "His irritability" –, but also by his eerie demeanour and crepuscular habits, which somehow anticipate the vampires of horror fiction (Bram Stoker's *Dracula* would be published the following year):

> the inhuman bludgeoning of all tentative advances of curiosity, the taste for twilight that led to the closing of doors, the pulling down of blinds, the extinction of candles and lamps—who could agree with such goings on? They drew aside as he passed down the village, and when he had gone by, young humourists would up with coat-collars and down with hat-brims, and go pacing nervously after him in imitation of his occult bearing. (21)

When Mrs. Hall sees the "Furniture That Went Mad" (29), she concludes that Griffin has "put the sperrits [*sic*] into the furniture" (31). The contamination with the motifs of Gothic literature gives a hint of the compositional process underlying Wells's romances, in which pre-existing narratives are given a (variously) scientific and cognitive framework. As Williams suggests, "Wells modernised an occult theme with roots in ancient myth and folklore, in this case found from Plato's story of the regicidal Gyges's invisibility ring, which he uses to seize power surreptitiously, to the caps and cloaks of Celtic fairytale and medieval romance" (2007, 50). In this regard, Griffin can also be seen as a petty Late-Victorian Faust. He is a scientist doomed to damnation, who disappears with his own forbidden science, like his precursors Time Traveller and Moreau (Pagetti 1986, 19–20). However, the 'inhuman' Griffin is also a chimera – as his name suggests –, a symbolic and implausible monstrosity, here created by scientific and technological developments.

Whereas the previous romances appropriate the colonial imagery to convey the fear of deanthropisation, *IM* uses the latter to explore the anxiety of modernity. This is evident in the second half of the novel, in which Griffin assumes the role of narrator and describes his own experience in London. In the large metropolis, his ontological status produces an ambivalent relationship with the hectic experience of urban modernity. When he leaves the domesticity of "House in Great Portland Streets" to become an atom in the entropic dimension of "Oxford Street", his attempt at *flânerie* is rather unsuccessful. In spite of his phantasmagorical absence-

presence, he is incapable to, in Walter Benjamin's words, "[seek] refuge in the crowd" (2008, 104):

> I tried to get into the stream of people, but they were too thick for me, and in a moment my heels were being trodden upon. I took to the gutter, the roughness of which I found painful to my feet, and forthwith the shaft of a crawling hansom dug me forcibly under the shoulder blade, reminding me that I was already bruised severely. I staggered out of the way of the cab, avoided a perambulator by a convulsive movement, and found myself behind the hansom. (*IM*, 106)

The promise of unrestrained voyeurism is counterbalanced by a growing sense of detachment. For the Invisible Man, the crowd is a series of alluring sensory stimuli that nonetheless reject him:

> Then I became aware of a blare of music, and looking along the street saw a number of people advancing out of Russell Square, red shirts, and the banner of the Salvation Army to the fore. Such a crowd, chanting in the roadway and scoffing on the pavement, I could not hope to penetrate, and dreading to go back and farther from home again, and deciding on the spur of the moment, I ran up the white steps of a house facing the museum railings, and stood there until the crowd should have passed. (107).

As an outcast, the man cannot enjoy the aestheticized experience of urban modernity, normally described as "overstimulating, liberating, and anonymous" (Brooker 1996, 10). The drawback of Griffin's anonymity – as form of otherness – is social ostracism and alienation. His only hope is to flee the chaos of the main thoroughfare, and to lose himself into the "the maze of less frequented roads that runs hereabouts" (*IM*, 109).

Even though his experience as urban stroller is a failure, Griffin still manages to reach what Benjamin identifies as "the last promenade for the flâneur", i.e. the "department store" (Benjamin 2008, 104). In order to find shelter from the adverse weather conditions, he enters "Omniums, the big establishment where everything is to be bought, […] meat, grocery, linen, furniture, clothing, oil paintings even, – a huge meandering collection of shops rather than a shop (110). Here, the *Homo superior* turns into *Homo oeconomicus* (see Cantor 1999, 94). In spite of his own disdain for "sordid commercialism" (*IM,* 96), Griffin plans to explore the shopping centre in order to "procure clothing to make myself a muffled but acceptable figure" (111). The desire for "acceptability" is central to the character's attempt to regain the social inclusion that has always been negated. As soon as he gets hold of "socks, a thick conforter",

"trousers, a lounge jacket, an overcoat and a slouch hat", he "began to feel a human being again" (112), "perhaps a grotesque but still a credible figure" (117). Griffin's identity is thus reappropriated through the acquisition of commodities. To a certain extent, he is what he owns, for its belongings are the only way he can be perceived by the other people. As K. Williams points out, "Griffin's objectification raises the unsettling question of the role linguistic and material fetishism might play in producing normal social subjects and their representation in cultural texts" (2007, 63). In this regard, the romance serves as a commentary on the relationship between subjectivity and capitalism, dramatizing the phantasmagorical quality of mass-produced commodities: "It is almost as if Wells is parodying the significance of this reification process by pushing his use of metonymy to a grotesque extreme, so that manufactured objects, including clothes, do literally become autokinetic, with an apparent life of their own, and the human agency behind them vanishes (*ibid*.).

However, Griffin is not merely an alienated victim of modernity. To a certain extent, his condition of invisibility can be seen as a symbolic resistance against the pervasive panopticism of modern societies (Cantor 1999, 97). Proposed by Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (published in France in 1975), the term-notion panopticism comes from 'Panopticon', a type of institutional building and penal facility designed in the late eighteenth century by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham.[39] Foucault famously uses the Panopticon as a metaphor for the exercise of disciplinary power in modern societies. The French philosopher describes the building as a "machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad" ([1975] 1995, 202), conceived to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). The importance of the Panopticon lies in its versatility, and in the ways in which the underlying concept can be applied to a multiplicity of contexts:

> It is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoner, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work. It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons. Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used. (205)

The trap of visibility produces the inmates – in the broadest sense – as atomized subjects, bringing them under self-subjection. The creation of disciplinary society is made possible by

the structuration of surveillance as technology of domination. The method of the scientist, of the 'experimental investigator' is appropriated by the nation-state and its various apparatuses of power.

Whereas the dialectic of observation (seeing/being seen) is a central motif in Wells's early scientific romances, his later utopias also explore the technological possibilities of surveillance. *WSW*, for example, describes an urban fantasy of near-absolute visibility, "where public and private space are saturated with advanced systems of marketing and control" (K. Williams 2007, 73). The London of the year 2100 is always floodlit by "Gigantic globes of cool white light", which "shamed the pale sunbeams that filtered down through the girders and wires" (*WSW*, 378). The city is thus "lit day and night for evermore, so that there was no night there" (384). Moreover, the megalopolis is monitored by cameras: "halfway down the frail-seeming stem was a light gallery about which hung a cluster of tubes – minute they looked from above – rotating slowly on the ring of its outer rail. These were the specula, *en rapport* with the wind-vane keeper's mirrors" (417). This form of technological surveillance is later institutionalised in Wells's vision of a modern utopia. He imagines what today we would call a database, "some scheme by which every person in the world can be promptly and certainly recognised, and by which anyone missing can be traced and found" (*MU*, 112). This "inventory of the State would watch its every man" (114), keeping track of "the record of their movement hither and thither" (112). With hindsight, it is possible to see these devices as the prototype of the telescreens in George Orwell's *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* (1949), but also of the glass-city in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) (see K. Williams 2007, 76–77).

For surveillance is one of the institutions of modernity (Giddens 1990, 57), Griffin can be seen as pre-modern in his challenge to panopticism (see Cantor 1999, 96–99). As the subtitle suggests, he is "grotesque" in the literal sense, for he hides, unseen as a man in a grotto. The visibility-invisibility conflict is most visible in the last part of the tale, in which the villagers organise a search party to hunt for the Invisible Man. As Kemp suggests, "You must set every available man to work; you must prevent his leaving this district. […] You must set a watch on trains and roads and shipping. The garrison must help. You must wire for help. […] And you must prevent him from eating or sleeping; day and night the country must be astir for him" (*IM*, 131). The hunt for Griffin quickly degenerates into a sort of police state:

in a great circle of twenty miles round Port Burdock, men armed with guns and bludgeons were presently setting out in groups of three and four, with dogs, to beat the roads and fields.

Mounted policemen rode along the country lanes, stopping at every cottage and warning the people to lock up their houses, and keep indoors unless they were armed, and all the elementary schools had broken up by three o'clock, and the children, scared and keeping together in groups, were hurrying home. (135)

As a consequence, "before nightfall an area of several hundred square miles was in a stringent state of siege" (*ibid*.).

However, the principle of surveillance is not merely subverted, but also appropriated. The Invisible Man is "a metaphor for the ultimate voyeur" (K. Williams 2007, 53), a sort of romantic anti-hero who escapes the pervasiveness of the gaze, and employs it for his own purposes.[40] Like a present-day terrorist, he in fact exploits a combination of surveillance-induced paranoia – Kemps fears that "He may be watching me now" (*IM*, 140) – and sheer violence: "This invisibility, in fact, is only good in two cases: It's useful in getting away, it's useful in approaching. It's particularly useful, therefore, in killing. […] And it is killing we must do, Kemp" (127–128). Under Griffin's Reign of Terror, everyone in every moment could be a victim. He epitomises two conflicting forms of power, i.e. the pre-modern irrationality of the sovereign, necessitating "emphatic affirmation of power" (Foucault [1975] 1995, 49), and the rationalised panopticism of the modern state. A walking oxymoron, Griffin thus represents the paradox of terrorism, which is "a rupture *of* history, in which the anachronistic and the utopian are made inexplicably incarnate" (Houen 2002, 14).

As in *TM* and *IDM*, the deanthropisation of the Other also produces a mutation in the middle-class observer. In *IM*, the contamination stems from Griffin's twofold nature, the modern/panoptical and the premodern/violent, which are both projected onto the social community. Whereas the citizens first reciprocate the Invisible Man's voyeurism, they later appropriate his violent means, resorting to the use of force. At the end of the novel, Griffin is brutally killed by the angry mob who was looking for him:

Kemp clung to him in front like a hound to a stag, and a dozen hands gripped, clutched, and tore at the Unseen. The tram conductor suddenly got the neck and shoulders and lugged him back.

Down went the heap of struggling men again and rolled over. There was, I am afraid, some savage kicking. Then suddenly a wild scream of 'Mercy! Mercy!' that died down swiftly to a sound like choking. (IM, 152)

In this brief passage, the "moralising intrusion of the narrator" (McLean 2009, 86) suggest the ethical distance with the villagers, who have reverted to the primitive ferocity of the animal man (Pagetti 1986, 24). The subversion produced by the Invisible Man must be contained, and his killing is to be "ritualistic: the community reverts to a primitive instinct of self-preservation in order to defend its order and organization" (Pearson 2007, 65).

Many of the themes introduced in *IM* are developed in the subsequent *WWs*. The latter romance further explores the motif of the "disembodied intellect" (Kumar 1987, 184; see also Williamson 1973, 32), and magnifies the effects of the contact with the threatening, invading other. The anxiety of being attacked by an uncontrollable force escapes the controlled environment of the utopian laboratory – the island, the village. The skirmishes in the English countryside take on the aspect of a full-fledged war, in which "destruction" becomes "indiscriminate and universal" (*WWs*, 55).[41] The fetishized absence-presence of the Invisible Man is replaced by the horrific otherness of the Martians: "There was a mouth under the eyes, the lipless brim of which quivered and panted, and dropped saliva. The whole creature heaved and pulsated convulsively" (21).

As McLean points out, "*The War of the Worlds* constitutes perhaps the author's most sustained critique of anthropocentrism" (2009, 94). Here, the tension between 'old' and 'new' hermeneutical categories reaches its dramatic peak. The "sense of dethronement" (*WWs*, 144) described throughout the course of the novel signifies the fallacy of the anthropocentric bias, exemplified by the characters' initial inability to identify the alien as non-human. The epistemological inadequacy of this system of thought is introduced by the protagonist-narrator in the very first page of the novel, in which he claims that

> terrestrial men fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise. Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment. (*WWs*, 7)[42]

Wells had already discredited this 'fancy' of human extra-terrestrials in an 1896 essay, "Evolution on Mars", which constitutes a major source for his romance. In this article, he claims that "No phase of anthropomorphism is more naive than the supposition of men on Mars. The place of such a conception in the world of thought is with the anthropomorphic cosmogonies

and religions invented by the childish conceit of primitive man" (Herbert George Wells [1896] 1975, 178).

At the beginning of *WWs*, the only character able to escape the trap of anthropocentrism is Ogilvy, the scientific mind, one of the few named figures and a friend of the narrator's. He is "the well-known astronomer" (*WWs*, 10) who "pointed out to me how unlikely it was that organic evolution had taken the same direction in the two adjacent planets. 'The chances against anything man-like on Mars are a million to one,' he said" (11). However, the narrator – Wells's diegetic surrogate (Pagetti 1986, 29) – disagrees with his friend on the nature of the aliens: "In spite of Ogilvy, I still believed that there were men in Mars" (18). It is interesting to notice that Ogilvy, the first to actually meet the Martians, seems to revise his opinion at the sight of the cylindrical spaceship. The ways in which his scientific understanding is replaced by (detrimental) emphatic solidarity is conveyed by the semantical choices: he first assumes to see a "shooting star" (*WWs*, 13), a "projectile", then a "Thing" – note the capitalisation, as in *IDM* – that is "almost entirely buried in the sand" (14). As soon as he approaches the "cylinder" – a "mass" of a great size –, Ogilvy sees that it is opening, and deduces that "Something within the cylinder was unscrewing the top!" (15). Contradicting his previous statements, Ogilvy then claims that "'There's a man in it – men in it! Half roasted to death! Trying to escape!". As John Batchelor suggests, "It is a mark of late-Victorian confidence that these people assume that the creatures in the cylinder will be friendly and recognisably *human*" (1985, 24 emphasis in the original). Ogilvy leaves the common to call for help, and when he returns, he notices that the cylinder is still and silent. He thus surmises that "the man or men inside must be insensible or dead" (16). In this way, the doubly erroneous news of "'dead men from mars'" (*ibid*.) starts circulating. When a great amount of people reaches the pit, "the popular expectation of a heap of charred corpses was disappointed at this inanimate bulk (17). Eventually, the delusion of anthropocentrism is wiped out by the Martians' utter otherness:

> I think everyone expected to see a man emerge – possibly something a little unlike us terrestrial men, but in all essentials a man. I know I did. But, looking, I presently saw something stirring within the shadow: greyish billowy movements, one above another, and then two luminous disks – like eyes. Then something resembling a little grey snake, about the thickness of a walking stick, coiled up out of the writhing middle, and wriggled in the air towards me – and then another. (21)

When the Martians fully appear in their technological sublimity, the narrator's descriptive ability somehow vacillates: "And this Thing I saw! How can I describe it? A monstrous tripod, higher than many houses, striding over the young pine trees, and smashing them aside in its career" (48).

To overcome these perceptive difficulties, two different strategies are alternatively implemented. One the one hand, the narrator resorts to the *logos* of scientific observation. The discursive appropriation is most evident in the lecture on alien biology, one of the passages which testify Wells's reuse of his own (and others') scientific journalist

> The internal anatomy, I may remark here, as dissection has since shown, was almost equally simple. The greater part of the structure was the brain, sending enormous nerves to the eyes, ear, and tactile tentacles. Besides this were the bulky lungs, into which the mouth opened, and the heart and its vessels. The pulmonary distress caused by the denser atmosphere and greater gravitational attraction was only too evident in the convulsive movements of the outer skin. (125)

On the other hand, the aliens and their technology are described through a series of fantastical, mythological and religious images. On Horsell Common, the narrator first claims to see a "Gorgon groups of tentacles" (22); then, he and the other characters define the tripod/s as "mechanical colossi" (51), "giants in armour" (58), a "Titan" (109), "Briaretus of a handling machine" (139), "mechanical Samson" (166).[43] These allusions suggest the ways in which, in Wells's romances, "The cognitive experience of science and history is filtered through the magnifying glass of imagination" (Vallorani 2005, 307). In particular, *WWs* shows in a clear manner that the non-cognitive dimension of myth is appropriated to domesticate the 'scientific' alterity, to represent the unfathomable alien as a knowable object. As Mr. Bensington points out in *The Food of the Gods and How It Came to Earth,* when formulating a trade name for his newly-discovered substance, "For my part I incline to the good old classical allusion. It – it makes Science res –. Gives it a touch of old-fashioned dignity" (Herbert George Wells [1904] 1906, 9).

The Martians' otherness is further amplified by their own inability (or maybe unwillingness) to communicate with the humans. The previous Wellsian heroes have had the chance to interact with the aliens: the Traveller learns the Eloi's simple language and converses with Weena, Prendick is able to talk with the beast people – until the regression takes place –, and Kemp has a long conversation with Griffin, a loquacious disembodied voice that even

becomes a first-person narrator for several chapters. However, this possibility is denied in *WWs*. Here the creatures frustrate every "attempt at communication" (*WWs*, 25), both verbal and non-verbal (the white flag is ignored, or rather incinerated). The only perceivable sounds they produce are a "cheerful hooting" (134) – which the narrator believes not to be "a signal, but merely the expiration of air preparatory to the suctional operation" (129) –, and "a sobbing alternation of two notes, 'Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla'" (164), a "superhuman" distress call. Therefore, the sole human-alien interaction is the reciprocation of the gaze, another classic Wellsian motif. The romance explores the see/being seen dialectic, introduced in the previous works, and dramatizes in the most visible way the epistemological revision by which "the observer becomes vulnerable, particularly because – as Darwin extends the rule of science from inorganic to organic phenomena – the observer also becomes the observed" (Levine 1988, 15). *WWs* opens in fact with the image of the Martians 'scrutinising and studying' our planet (*WWs*, 7) – perhaps with a device similar to the "Crystal Egg" of the eponymous short story (see K. Williams 2007, 139) –, and continues with the narrator assisting Ogilvy in an observatory, "[taking] a turn with him that night in a scrutiny of the red planet" (10). As Draper points out, "The narrator's inspection of Mars through a telescope is preceded by the complementary image of the Martians looking down at us through a microscope, locking us in an uncomfortable position somewhere between the Martians above and microscopic organism below" (1987, 50). The pattern of reciprocal observation persists after the creatures' arrival on the Earth. This is evident during the scullery siege, when the narrator and the curate gain a privileged position, to scrutinize the Martians from a relatively safe spot, and to collect the facts for the alien biology lecture in BkII Ch2: "As the dawn grew clearer, we saw through the gap in the wall the body of a Martian, standing sentinel, I suppose, over the still glowing cylinder. At the sight of that we crawled as circumspectly as possible out of the twilight of the kitchen into the darkness of the scullery" (*WWs*, 120–121). At the same time, the Martians attempt to investigate the two men: "Then I saw through a sort of glass plate near the edge of the body the face, as we may call it, and the large dark eyes of a Martian, peering, and then a long metallic snake of tentacle came feeling slowly through the hole" (138). Like on the Martians' very first appearance, on Horsell Common, the "dark eyes" are the first element noticed by the narrator. The verbs employed to describe the aliens' activity suggest that they too are conducting a rational, scientific observation: "In the triangle of bright outer sunlight I saw the Martian […] scrutinizing the curate's head" (139); "Apparently it had taken a lump of coal to examine"

(*ibid.*). The main difference between the Martians and the narrator lays in the latter's awareness (thanks to his previous experiences) that being seen is equal to being slain: "I opened the door of the coal cellar, and stood there in the darkness staring at the faintly lit doorway into the kitchen, and listening. Had the Martian seen me? What was it doing now?" (138). In *WWs*, the Martians' infamous "Heat-Ray" is a panoptic gaze capable of utter destruction: "One or two adventurous souls, it was afterwards found, went into the darkness and crawled quite near the Martians; but they never returned, for now and again a light-ray, like the beam of a warship's searchlight swept the common, and the Heat-Ray was ready to follow" (36). The fear of being watched, introduced in *TM*, and amplified in *IDM* and *IM*, is here given a new dystopian connotation.

The scullery scene is significant for another reason. The sequence is structured on the symbolic tension between the rational narrator and his companion, the curate, who has fallen into a religious frenzy. His delirium constitutes a threat to the safety of the two men:

> "I have been still too long," he said, in a tone that must have reached the pit, "and now I must bear my witness. Woe unto this unfaithful city! Woe! Woe! Woe! Woe! Woe! To the inhabitants of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet –"
> "Shut up!" I said, rising to my feet, and in a terror lest the Martians should hear us. "For God's sake –" (*WWs*, 138)

The narrator sees the clergyman's religious raving as a sign of retrogression: "The curate, I found, was quite incapable of discussion; this new and culminating atrocity had robbed him of all vestiges of reason or forethought. Practically he had already sunk to the level of an animal" (134). Therefore, survival (i.e. evolutionary adaptation) demands that he be eliminated:

> I put out my hand and felt the meat chopper hanging to the wall. In a flash I was after him. I was fierce with fear. Before he was halfway across the kitchen I had overtaken him. With one last touch of humanity I turned the blade back and struck him with the butt. He went headlong forward and lay stretched on the ground (138).

The narrator survives at the expense of the inferior creature. The gesture demonstrates that, in spite of his "last touch of humanity", he has also "sunk to the level of an animal". Or, in the fictional universe of the novel, to the level of the apex predator, i.e. the Martian. Once again, the deanthropisated Other contaminates the terrestrial, middle-class observer. Humans acquire the traits of non-human invaders, showing the permeability of the ontological divide.

Throughout the course of the novel, the signs of contagion are suggested by the lexical choices and the images employed by the narrator. The cylinder in which the Martians have travelled is "sticking into the skin of our old planet Earth like a poisoned dart" (*WWs*, 36), a simile which evokes the "twin notions of infection and poisoning" (Vallorani 2014, 55). The venom transubstantiates both the live and the dead: the earthlings escape from the Martians "as blindly as a flock of sheep" (*WWs*, 30), while the charred corpses are deanthropised to the point of becoming inanimate things: "Around it was a patch of silent common, smouldering in places, and with a few dark, dimly seen objects lying in contorted attitudes here and there" (37). The narrator himself is not immune from the aliens' transformative power: "The fear I felt was no rational fear, but a panic terror not only of the Martians, but of the dusk and stillness all about me. Such an extraordinary effect in unmanning me it had that I ran weeping silently as a child might do" (27). Here the narrator relies on the vagueness of the verb 'unman', employed in the twofold sense of a regression to a feminine-childish and to a non-human ontological status[44].

Once man is 'unmanned', it undergoes a zoomorphic retrogression. As Mclean suggests,

> the struggle for existence invoked implies the brutalisation of humanity rather than the necessary stage in its evolutionary ascendancy […]. The characterisation of the 'multitudes' which engage in a savage struggle to escape the oncoming Martians reveals how the functioning of the cosmic process in human society results only in *turning humans into animals*. (2009, 98, emphasis added)

The outlook of animal deanthropization is a constant anxiety in *WWs*. For instance, the narrator feels to have been degraded to a lower status: "I, who had talked with God, crept out of the house like a rat leaving its hiding place – a creature scarcely larger, an inferior animal, a thing that for any passing whim of our masters might be hunted and killed" (149). The same simile is also employed, a few pages later, by the artilleryman, who is describing his 'sewers' utopia': "The tame ones will go like all tame beasts; in a few generations they'll be big, beautiful, rich-blooded, stupid – rubbish! The risk is that we who keep wild will go savage – degenerate into a sort of big, savage rat…" (157). As Fitting points out, "In these and similar images of our inferiority Wells does provide us with a means for imagining how the Martians view humans – like pests rather than as equals" (2000, 139). Moreover, the similes and metaphors express the decentring and relativization of man – simultaneously meaning humanity at large and white Europeans: "I felt the first inkling of a thing that presently grew quite clear in my mind, that

oppressed me for many days, a sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal among the animals, under the Martian heel" (*WWs*, 144).

Animals are not the only conceptual metaphor employed by Wells. The most vivid image of deanthropisation draws on the realm of physics, and it is used to describe the large-scale consequences of the invasion: "By ten o'clock the police organisation, and by midday even the railway organisations, were losing coherency, losing shape and efficiency, guttering, softening, running at last in that swift liquefaction of the social body" (92). Later on, the narrator describes a crowded road as "a boiling stream of people, a torrent of human beings rushing northward, one pressing on another" (97).[45] These images – similar to other employed in previous books (Draper 1987, 57) – signify Wells's growing interest in the representation of the masses, which, along with the urban scenario, would become the aesthetic core of his own following romance, *WSW*.

At the end of *WWs*, the protagonist-narrator finally reaches "Dead London" (163), in which the "superhuman note" (164) of the Martians signifies their premature and unexpected demise.

> And scattered about it, some in their overturned war-machines, some in the now rigid handling-machines, and a dozen of them stark and silent and laid in a row, were the Martians – *dead!* – slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared (168, emphasis in the original).

The pattern of contagion is reversed. The invading alien are invaded, infected by earthly bacteria, "the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth" (*ibid.*). Their inability to adapt – and thus their evolutionary failure – is ironically rooted in their own scientific advancement: "Micro-organisms, which cause so much disease and pain on earth, have either never appeared upon Mars or Martian sanitary science eliminated them ages ago. A hundred diseases, all the fevers and contagions of human life, consumption, cancers, tumours and such morbidities, never enter the scheme of their life" (*WWs*, 128). However, the providential 'survival of the fittest' mechanism has intervened too late. Even though the invaders are defeated, the survivors have already mutated, and they almost resemble the Morlocks of *TM*, "then I noticed how yellow were the skins of the people I met, how shaggy the hair of the men, how large and bright their eyes, and that every other man still wore his dirty rags" (*WWs*, 173–74). The narrator also suffers from (what we would now call) PTSD, a condition which recalls Prendick's paranoia at the end of *IDM*:

I must confess the stress and danger of the time have left an abiding sense of doubt and insecurity in my mind. I sit in my study writing by lamplight, and suddenly I see again the healing valley below set with writhing flames, and feel the house behind and about me empty and desolate. I go out into the Byfleet Road, and vehicles pass me, a butcher boy in a cart, a cabful of visitors, a workman on a bicycle, children going to school, and suddenly they become vague and unreal, and I hurry again with the artilleryman through the hot, brooding silence. Of a night I see the black powder darkening the silent streets, and the contorted bodies shrouded in that layer; they rise upon me tattered and dog-bitten. They gibber and grow fiercer, paler, uglier, mad distortions of humanity at last, and I wake, cold and wretched, in the darkness of the night. (*WWs*, 179–180)

His "sense of doubt and insecurity" and his delusions symbolise the ultimate crisis of the observer. The coming of the Martians – i.e. the new scientific paradigm – deprives the narrator from his reliability, and he is no longer able to produce a coherent image of his own experience. Wells thus describes the tension between a Baconian empiricism – in which "the power of science, and hence its authority, lay in its self-denying surrender to the observed fact" (Levine 1988, 15) –, and a post-empiricist *episteme* which surrenders to the unreliability of the human observer (Vallorani 1996b, 284).

As the last romance of Wells's first artistic phase, *WWs* constitutes a compendium of the themes and motifs elaborated since the early drafts of *TM*. In particular, it exemplifies the dialectic structure of his first four romances, which employ science to articulate a vision of the future via two distinct but intertwined discourses: the evolutionary prospect of the posthuman, and the ontological and epistemological decentring that results in the non-human. From the secluded dimension of Moreau's island, and the rural reign of terror of *IM*, to the ruins of the "Great Mother of Cities" (*WWs*, 169), these two notions coalesce in "a highly menacing yet finally inoperative novum" (Suvin 1979, 218). The Martians (and the Eloi/Morlocks, the beast folk, the Invisible Man) epitomise the human condition in an increasingly unknowable post-Darwinian (and post-Huxleyan) universe, whose indifferent laws do not take into account welfare or happiness.

However, *WWs*'s uniqueness lies in the way in which the novel opens up to eutopian alternatives to the catastrophe. At least two different hypotheses can be identified, both prefiguring certain developments of the later Wells. One is in the novel's epilogue, when the narrator describes the long-term consequences of the failed invasion. He comments that "this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has done much to promote the conception of the *commonweal of mankind*" (*WWs*, 179, emphasis added). This latter notion

foreshadows the abstract, collective utopianism of the "Mind of the Race" – "an evolving sense of the oneness of mankind and a collective commitment to the common purposes of humanity" (Kumar 1987, 189) –, and of the "Open Conspiracy", detailed in the 1928 eponymous book, which puts forward the idea of "Scientific World Commonweal".

The other eutopian hypothesis is the underground community fantasised – thus reinforcing the idea of utopia as "verbal construction" (Suvin 1979, 40) – by the artilleryman. In outlining his blueprint for a 'more perfect' society, he first points out the necessity for a change: "We *have to* invent a sort of life where men can live and breed, and be sufficiently secure to bring the children up. Yes – wait a bit, and I'll make it clearer what I think *ought to be done*" (*WWs*, 156, emphasis added). Thanks to the Martians' providential intervention, a new order can be imagined, minus the flaws of the previous establishment. He hence plans to build a eugenic, fascist enclave in which "the useless and cumbersome and mischievous *have to die*. They *ought to die*. They *ought to be willing to die*. It's a sort of disloyalty, after all, to live and taint the race." (157, emphasis added).

Critics have suggested that the artilleryman's ideas "are nascent articulations of those ideas which Wells himself would later delineate in his first major sociological work, Anticipations (1901)" (McLean 2009, 110). In particular, the character anticipates Wells's belief in negative eugenics as viable instrument to improve humanity (see Busch 2009, 36–41). As Wells writes in *MU*, "No longer will it be that failures must suffer and perish lest their breed increase, but the breed of failure must not increase, lest they suffer and perish, and the race with them" (96). It can be added that the artilleryman's speech suggests an important conceptual and ideological shift. The deontic modality of the utterances entails the passage from description to prescription, i.e. from a sci-fi in which science is used "as a means to challenge the existing world" (Draper 1987, 54), to one which produces a perfected vision of the future, and states how things should be done. In this regard, the "commonweal of mankind" and the artilleryman signify a radical epistemological and literary discontinuity in Wells's production. The idea that, despite the universe's indifference, happiness and/or the dream of a better society (whatever this may entail) can be pursued. However, in order to change the world, it is necessary to act according to a plan, and 'good practices' are to be imposed ("the useless […] have to die") and then interiorised ("They ought to be willing to die"). Utopia, both as a literary genre and a concept, can provide the blueprint for this normative project.

However, we still have to determine the relationship between this utopian scheme and the Wellsian super-/post-human. In other words, how the discourses of posthumanity and deanthropisation relate to the cognitively plausible formulation of an alternative historical scenario. The answer to the dilemma lies in the dialectical reversal of the previous narratives, through which the dystopian social dreaming of Doctor Moreau and Griffin is given a eutopian interpretation. The sci-fi *übermensch* hence becomes the enclave which enables a radical reconceptualization of modernity. But to see it, we must move to the London of 2100.

1.7 Sociology, Utopia and Romance: *When the Sleeper Wakes*

Serialized from January to May 1899 in *The Graphic* (in London) and in *Harper's Weekly* (in New York),[46] *WSW* opens the second phase of Wells's literary career.[47] "The first of these new-style scientific romances" (Draper 1987, 4), it epitomises in fact the passage from the post-Darwinian pessimism of the first works to a novel dimension of "social purposiveness" (Herbert George Wells [1934] 1984, 624), in which the writer merges his Huxleyan views on evolution and his interest in futurology with a non-Marxist socialist utopianism (see Parrinder 1995, 18–33). In his early scientific fantasies – especially *TM*, *IDM* and *WWs* –, Wells had already appropriated and subverted some elements of the utopian genre (Pagetti 1986, 15; Porta 1997). However, in *WSW* he has the chance to fully experiment with the cultural and narrative formulas (in the meaning codified by Cawelti 1976, 5–8), and to produce his first proper utopian and sociological story (Kumar 1987, 187). In fact, *WSW* also signals the shift from the enthusiasm in the natural sciences that characterises the early dystopian tales, to a growing interest in the social sciences and scientific humanism (Vallorani 1996a, 37).

As a prototype for Wells's own later speculative fiction – and also for several anti-utopian anticipations of the twentieth century, like Zamyatin's and Orwell's (Suvin 1979, 218) – *WSW* is a transitional and seminal text. First, it rearticulates the posthuman and non-human trends of Wells's early romances in an ambiguous ideal society, a future megalopolis radically different from the well-established literary models conceived by Edward Bellamy and William Morris. In second place, it develops the protagonist-hero as transformative agent able to ameliorate the vision of the future, paving the way for the eutopian supermen of twentieth-century pulp sci-fi and comics. Third, it employs the main character as powerful instrument for the exploration of

modernity, at the historical discontinuity between Victorianism and twentieth-century cultural modernism. Lastly, it stages a set of *fin-de-siècle* anxieties for the possible corporatization, commodification and massification of Western society, in a London which assumes the characteristics of a North American metropolis.

Foreshadowed by *WSW*, Wells's 'conversion' to utopian literature is traditionally interpreted as the sign of his different attitude towards life and the future. For instance, Bernard Bergonzi points out that "After 1900 Wells's interest in the future became much more positive, […] and was realized in a series of Utopian scenarios, culminating in his attempt to write a long and detailed history of the future in *The Shape of the Things to Come* (1933)" (1976b, 4). This idea has brought to the long-standing division between a 'pessimistic' and a 'optimistic' Wells, with the latter as the Edwardian development of the Victorian former. In particular, one text is seen as the definite signal of the attitude change: "Before 1900 Wells had tended to see man as trapped and doomed in the evolutionary process, but from *Anticipations* onwards there is a tendency towards optimism" (Batchelor 1985, 64). Anthony West, son of the writer and Rebecca West, has contributed to reinforce the notion, adding as a possible correlation (if not a proper cause) Wells's active involvement in politics: "The change of front from an explicit pessimism to an apparent optimism dates roughly from 1901 and the publication of *Anticipations*. It coincides with Wells' entry into the sphere of influence of the Fabian society in political matters and of that of William James in philosophy" (West [1957] 1976, 18). Among other possible causes, critics have suggested a combination of personal reasons with the mutated *zeitgeist* of the new century:

> [Wells's] desire to change the world no doubt took shape from his social mobility, and his growing optimism that change might be near was similarly related the improved health, prosperity and status which came to him with the new century. However, his Edwardian works were also part of a general attempt by writers of fiction to advance from the kind of imaginative secession from contemporary reality which had dominated the 1890s to a new position of critical engagement." (Draper 1987, 59)

Even though the critical commonplace of a clear-cut division between 'the two Wellses' appears nowadays to be over-simplistic (113), the identification of the cultural and epistemological roots of the utopian turn has not lost its value. In this regard, I suggest that Wells's interest in sociology should be given critical attention, in order to scrutinise the ways in which *WSW* laid down the ambiguous foundation of pop superheroism.

As demonstrated by *TM*'s passages on the Morlock-Eloi relationship, the study of social behaviour had influenced Wells's romances (and journalism) since the early stages of his career. However, it is only at the turn of the century that sociology – and social sciences in general – start to serve as the primary cognitive basis for his fictional and non-fictional output. As he points out in *Experiments in Autobiography*, while expounding his attitude in the early years of the twentieth century,

> What concerns me now is the story of my own disentanglement and the curious way in which I was using my prestige and possibilities as an imaginative writer, to do the thinking-out of this problem of human will and government, under fantastic forms. Just as Pope found it easier to discuss natural theology in verse, so at this stage, I found it more convenient to discuss sociology in fable. (Herbert George Wells [1934] 1984, 653–54)

Wells's interest in sociology is even more relevant if we consider his own peculiar approach to the discipline. He in fact believes that work of the sociologist should largely correspond to the activity of the utopist (see Kumar 1987, 188). This conceptualization is detailed in the 1906 paper "The So-called Science of Sociology" (later reprinted in *An Englishman Looks at the World*), in which the writer critiques the positivist approach of Comte and Spencer: "My trend of thought leads me to deny that sociology is a science, or only a science in the same loose sense that modern history is a science, and to throw doubt upon the value of sociology that follows too closely what is called the scientific method" (Herbert George Wells 1914, 192). It follows that "sociology must be neither art simply, nor science in the narrow meaning of the word at all, but knowledge rendered imaginatively, and with an element of personality; that is to say, in the highest sense of the term, literature" (202). Once the 'literary' nature of the discipline is postulated, Wells argues that the descriptive phase of the sociological work is to be accompanied by a prescriptive activity: "There is no such thing in sociology as dispassionately considering what *is*, without considering what is *intended to be*" (203, emphasis in the original). This normative shift has a precise methodological consequence: "I think, in fact, that the creation of Utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the proper and distinctive method of sociology" (204).

In order to grasp the relationship between Wells's fiction and this new approach, I recuperate and adapt the notions of hybridity, dialogism, and heteroglossia, codified by Mikhail Bakhtin in the essay "Discourse and the Novel". Wells's scientific romance – as the name itself suggest – can in fact be seen as an example of "hybrid construction" (Bakhtin 1981, 304), in

which two different discourses, two different *logoi* coexist: on the other hand, the literary genre of romance, with its established formulas and conventions; on the other hand, the body of thought that goes under the name of 'science', permeating the novel both as a discourse and as a textual output (papers, scientific journalism, etc.). Therefore, the scientific utterance, which Bakhtin subsumes into the "Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech" (Bakhtin 1981, 262) is given prominence as a fundamental part in the heteroglot structure of the novel.

Since this form of internal dialogism can arguably be identified as a characteristic of the entire sci-fi genre, it is not peculiar to Wells's romances. However, the embryonic quality of the fiction produced by the English writer makes the heteroglossia particularly visible. Being the genre in its "initial period of articulation and discovery" (Cawelti [1979] 2012, 296) in which formulas are being created, the two different discourses are not yet merged into a homogeneous compositional unit. In Wells's early sci-fi, the mutual contamination of Victorian romance and the *logos* of science can be seen in: a) the direct (and indirect) quotations of scientific writing – often by Wells himself; b) the deictic structure of the plot, with "theories formulated and discarded as the evidence is pieced together" (Draper 1987, 43; see also Pagetti 1986, 31); c) the way in which well-established fantastic tropes (the time-travel, the ring of invisibility) are given a technological patina. Most of the times, Wells manages to contain the centrifugal force of the two discourses. However, it also happens that the modes of 'scientific exposition' and 'fantastic narration' conflict, because of the different textual purposes: the former in fact aims at exhaustive and clear elucidation, while the latter yearns for suspense and fruitful ambiguity. The clash is noticeable in the serialized version of *WWs*, in the chapter with the biology lecture. After having described the ways in which "the Martian physiology differs from ours" (*sWWs*, 85), the narrator says: "The last point in which their systems differ from ours is in what one might have thought a very trivial particular. Micro-organisms […] have either never appeared upon Mars, or Martian sanitary science eliminated the ages ago. But of that I will write more at length later" (86). Here the narrator, acting as a scientific populariser, should provide the complete information. However, expounding the whole picture would reveal the plot twist that concludes the novel, i.e. that the Martians are vulnerable to human bacteria.[48] The schizophrenia of two roles – populariser and romancer – produce an impasse that is surgically removed in the volume edition of the work.

Marginal as it might seem, this passage signifies Wells's preoccupation with the compositional and formal qualities of his writing (see Vallorani 1996a, 30–33). In the first phase of his career, the distance between the rigour of the hard sciences and the imaginative aspects of the romance necessitates a complex work of mediation. As the multiple revisions of *TM*, *WWs* and *WSW* demonstrate, the individuation of a fertile common ground entails a certain amount of 'trial and error'. This process, however, allows Wells to sample and practice different literary techniques. For instance, in his third and fourth scientific romances, *IM* and *WWs*, the narrator alternates between first and third person, evoking the ideological implications of the divide between 'romance' and 'novel'.[49] At this early stage, Wells's sci-fi is thus the protean and unstable output of an experiment in inventiveness. Only when social sciences substitute natural sciences as "mainspring for his literary imagination" (Kumar 1987, 181), the writer manages to achieve the "silk-shot texture between philosophical discussion on the one hand and imaginative narrative on the other" (*MU*, xxxiii) displayed in *MU*. Since sociology is already – as Wells conceives it – "literature", it can be easily merged with the creative and imaginative output of the author.[50] The result is not "the set drama of the work of fiction you are accustomed to read, nor the set lecturing of the essay you are accustomed to evade, but a hybrid of these two" (*MU*, 8).

The creation of this sociological-literary hybrid form has thus two significant consequences: on the one hand, it prefigures the twentieth-century development of the so-called social science fiction, a sub-genre informed by the idea that "These 'soft sciences' can […] most probably better serve as a basis for sci-fi than the 'hard' natural sciences" (Suvin 1979, 68). On the other hand, the hybrid form means for Wells to renegotiate the relationship between science and imagination, and to relinquish the (alleged) exact certitude of biology, chemistry, optics or astronomy. The 'science' of the scientific romance is replaced by a discipline that Wells considers unfit to "[follow] too closely what is called the scientific method" (Herbert George Wells 1914, 192). This sudden opening towards a dimension of epistemological uncertainty, added to the blatant didacticism of his post-Edwardian production (Bergonzi 1976b, 5), is arguably one of the causes of the lack of coherence of the later, discursive Wells (Draper 1987, 109).

In addition to analysing the conversion from natural to social sciences, the notion of heteroglossia comes in handy to scrutinize the ways in which Wells elaborates the prescriptive tension displayed in *WSW* (and in the subsequent "fantasias of possibilities").[51] In other words,

how the romance employs the heroic figure of the Sleeper to epitomize what I would call the inherent prescriptivism of utopia. Being rooted in the fundamental "dialectic of Identity and Difference" (Jameson 2005, xii), the utopian vision in fact implies that the "non-existent society" (Sargent 1994, 9) 'should' or 'must' be in a certain way in order to be "considerably better" (i.e. eutopia) or "considerably worse [i.e. dystopia] than the society in which the reader lives". *WSW*'s world does not clearly belong to any of these two categories, for it is extrapolated and not imagined (Vallorani 1996a, 80). Hence, it is (to be) "eutopianised" by the intervention of the hero, who appropriates the normative role, and replaces the demiurge-author as the creator of a better society. This mode of estrangement hence establishes a critical distance, by which utopia is not given *a priori*, but it can be elaborated by a dialectic process of negotiation.

The conceptual shift from description to prescription can be better understood as a product of the internal dialogism of the scientific romance. Drawing an analogy from Jean-François Lyotard's study on the metanarratives of modernity, *The Postmodern Condition*, the imaginative fictionality of the romance can be seen 'as it were' the "narrative of legitimation" (Lyotard [1979] 1984, 31) of the knowledge produced by the scientific element. This means that the literary produces the scientific as a meaningful and representable object, while dictating the norms of its existence in the diegetic system. In Wells's early works, the 'legitimating narrative' produces a purely denotative statement, and science is used "as a means to challenge the existing world, not as a vision of life in its own right" (Draper 1987, 54). When sociology substitutes natural sciences as cognitive basis, and society replaces biological evolution as the core of Wells's speculation (Philmus and Hughes 1975b, 185), the mode of legitimation mutates. As in Lyotard's grand narrative of emancipation, in social sci-fi "knowledge finds its validity not within itself, not in a subject that develops by actualizing its learning possibilities, but in a practical subject-humanity" (Lyotard [1979] 1984, 35). Science becomes the instrument of/for the collective body, a tool of political liberation. Therefore,

> this mode of legitimation […] gives priority to a totally different language game, which Kant called imperative and is known today as prescriptive. The important thing is not, or not only, to legitimate denotative utterances pertaining to the truth, such as "The earth revolves around the sun," but rather to legitimate prescriptive utterances pertaining to justice, such as "Carthage must be destroyed" or "The minimum wage must be set at *x* dollars." In this context, the only role positive knowledge can play is to inform the practical subject about the reality within which the execution of the prescription is to be inscribed. (36)

The dialogism of the romance thus produces a dialectical oscillation between the literary imagination and the sociological element. The former serves as the legitimating basis of the latter, which in turns informs the narrative invention of the world-building project.

Within (and thanks to) this theoretical framework, *WSW* subverts the central motif of nineteenth-century Western utopian literature, namely the idea that the ideal society "was the product of the impersonal working out of dynamic historical forces, which was guiding humanity to the realization of its full potential in the modern socialist or scientific utopia" (Kumar 1987, 45). In *WSW*, by contrast, "the revolution is crudely imposed from the outside" (Draper 1987, 62), by the positive counterpart of Wells's previous dystopian monstrosities. The outsider Graham thus acts as transformative agent, as the Martians. He applies to the social body "the possibilities of directed change" (Busch 2009, 13) grotesquely conceived by Moreau.

In order to create a fictional environment in which to experiment this "direct change", Wells devises a utopia in the most neutral sense of "non-existent society" (Sargent 1994, 9). *WSW*'s London of 2100 is characterized by not being an ideal abstraction, as in the Western tradition of utopianism, but rather an extrapolation from the trends observed in the United Kingdom and in North America at the end of century.[52] It is described as a hypertechnological megalopolis, inhabited by "More than thirty-three millions" of people (*WSW*, 413), and in which the air is "sweet and pleasing and free from any sense of dust" (385). Aeroplanes are commonly used as means of transportations, while the road traffic has been substituted by "moving platforms that traversed the city" (398). However, the future society is soon revealed to be "an inferno of discontent and savage oppression" (Parrinder 2005, xv), where workers are systematically exploited, and "grown with the city to gigantic proportions, were poverty and hopeless labour and all the sorrows of his time" (*WSW*, 420). As Wells writes in the 1924 preface to the Atlantic Edition of *WSW*, "the chief assumptions upon which the scene is framed amount to a prolongation of the lines of tendencies that were most conspicuous in the last decade of the nineteenth century" (Herbert George Wells [1924] 2005, 5). In his autobiography, he confirms that

> the future in *When the Sleeper Awakes* (1898) was essentially an exaggeration of contemporary tendencies: higher buildings, bigger towns, wickeder capitalists and labour more down-trodden than ever and more desperate. Everything was bigger, quicker and more crowded; there was more and more flying and the wildest financial speculation. It was our contemporary world in a state of highly inflamed distension. Very much the same picture is given in *A Story of the Days to Come* (1899) and *A Dream of Armageddon* (1903). (Herbert George Wells [1934] 1984, 645)

In *The Future in America,* Wells details the 'proportional' method employed in *WSW*:

> one sets to work to trace the great changes of the last century or so, and one produces these in a straight line and according to the rule of three. If the maximum velocity of land travel in 1800 was twelve miles an hour and in 1900 (let us say) sixty miles an hour, then one concludes that in 2000 A.D. it will be three hundred miles an hour. […] In that fashion one got out a sort of gigantesque caricature of the existing world, everything swollen to vast proportions and massive beyond measure. (Herbert George Wells 1906, 8)

This creative process of extrapolation can be seen as one of the causes of *WSW*'s structural ambiguity. This latter feature has been noted by numerous commentators, as J.R. Hammond, who writes, "'A Story of the Days to Come', which describes a society closely akin to that of *The Sleeper Awakes*, is a powerful story marred by a curious ambiguity in the narration. It is never clear whether Wells approves or disapproves of the rigidly organised civilisation he describes […] and this deliberate ambiguity lessen the impact of his vision" (1979, 67). Williamsons criticizes the novel for being "flawed by Wells' conflicting attitudes" (1973, 106). Kumar describes *WSW* as "The most ambiguous of [Wells's] early science fantasies" (1987, 186), and the reader "remains for long puzzled as to Wells's intention in this work. For there are aspects of the future society that are glowingly described, many of which are the hallmarks of the society that Wells was later to make his distinctive Utopia" (187). Huntington claims that "WSW shares with 'Days to Come' a deep ambivalence about the liberating possibilities of technology" (Huntington 1982, 125) and that Graham is an "ambiguous" symbol (126). Parrinder writes that "The novel's political message […] is distinctly ambiguous" (Parrinder 2005, xix). All these critiques revolve around the inscrutability of, as Kumar makes explicit, Wells's intention. This leads to an impasse, for the conventions of the utopian genre suggest that the text should be recognisable as eutopian or dystopian. As Sargent points out, "It is necessary to examine the question of whether or not the author meant to write a eutopia, a dystopia, or any of the other proliferating varieties" (Sargent 1994, 12).

My point is that the romance appears to be cryptic because of its inbetweenness, and its manifest refusal to adhere to the well-established utopian-dystopian model. *WSW*'s ambiguity prevents in fact any 'monological interpretation of the romance' (Vallorani 1996a, 61), and suggests its problematic relationship with the utopian genre. Wells's text appropriates the tropes and the cultural implications of utopian literature, even though it violates several generic

formulas. Graham refers to "the dream of London in Morris's quaint *News from Nowhere*, and the perfect land of Hudson's beautiful *Crystal Age*" (*WSW*, 420), only to remark the distance of his situation from those literary abstractions. The Rip-Van-Winkle fantasy of a dreamlike journey into the ideal future is dismissed: "He thought of Bellamy, the hero of whose Socialistic Utopia had so oddly anticipated this actual experience. But here was no Utopia, no Socialistic state" (386).

This fertile ambiguity resonates with the Wellsian dialectic of posthuman and non-human. The two categories, formulated in the early scientific romances, are here translated into the 'new' utopian and sociological framework, to inform the relationship between Graham and the city. The dialectical tension thus produces a material and symbolic space in which the Sleeper can fulfil "the magnificent dream of the nineteenth century, the noble project of universal individual liberty and universal happiness, [which] had worked itself out in the face of invention and ignoble enterprise, first to a warring plutocracy, and finally to the rule of a supreme plutocrat" (*WSW*, 423).

The mechanism of deanthropization inaugurates the narrative development of *WSW*. At the beginning of the romance, when he falls into a trance, Graham is objectified to the point of becoming a liminal figure, a desubjectivated embodiment that prefigures his detachment from the future world.[53] Like the text of which he is the main character, the Sleeper exists in-between two ontological statuses: "For a great space he lay in that strange condition, inert and still – neither dead nor living but, as it were, suspended, hanging midway betwen nothingness and existence (367). He is put in a "case of thin glass", like a "waxen figure" (369), in a state that Isbister defines as "a sort of complete absence, […]. Not dead a bit, and yet not alive" (368). As K. Williams suggests, Graham's "miraculous trance has been another kind of paradoxical 'absent presence', like that of the Invisible Man, involving spatio-temporal displacement and conspicuous visual defamiliarisation" (2007, 74).

After two hundred years of coma, the Sleeper awakes in 2100 and discovers to have become a stone idol, a religious icon. He realises not only to be "Master of the Earth […] owner of half the world" (WSW, 394), but also that the masses have placed great hopes in his coming. During his epochal sleep, Graham has in fact gradually turned into "an iconic ideological space into which a whole civilisation projects its values" (K. Williams 2007, 74). He is the people's champion, at the centre of a quasi-religious cult of personality (see Parrinder 2005, xxi). His importance as simulacrum is so profound that Ostrog, the treacherous leader of the rebels, starts

training a "double", in case Graham should fall back asleep or be killed: "The whole of this revolt depends on the idea that you are awake, alive, and with us" (*WSW*, 410). This last scene is thematically consistent with the issue of Graham's subjectivity, revolving around the split between his private (Graham) and public (the Sleeper) persona. For instance, he is not recognised by the old man in the eleventh chapter, who accuses him of "telling a lie" (*WSW*, 407).[54] Later, Graham even assumes a costumed secret identity, like a pulp avenger or a comic book superhero. This third persona allows him to explore the city ways: "that night, unknown and unsuspected, Graham, dressed in the costume of an inferior wind-wane official keeping holiday, and […] surveyed the city through which he had wandered when it was veiled in darkness" (444).

Among the parties who have faith in the Sleeper, the most significant to Graham's development is Helen Wotton. His love interest – another cliché of the utopian romance (Porta 1997, 18; Parrinder 2010, 155) – serves in fact as "the necessary catalyst who transforms Graham, the awakened Sleeper and bewildered visitor, into a genuine hero and champions of his people" (Parrinder 2005, xxiii). Helen describes him as "the King who wold come in his own good time and put the world right for them" (438). Like in a Spiderman comic book, she reminds him that 'with great powers comes great responsibility': "do you think that the wonder and reverence of hope of half the world has gathered about you only that you may live another little life?... That you may shift the responsibility to any other man?" (*ibid.*).[55] In order to fulfil the role that history, destiny, and/or Helen have assigned to him, Graham is therefore to relinquish his passive status of simulacrum. He must become a romance hero, and bring into being his Victorian vision of socialist utopia, informed by "the memory of an age that hoped" (*WSW*, 465).

Throughout the course of the novel, the Sleeper's gradual transformation into an action hero is conveyed through semantical and syntactical choices. Since the early chapters, he is not characterised as an active agent, but as an idle observer. The reader in fact experiences the future London through Graham's gaze (K. Williams 2007, 82), and the narration revolves around his spasmodic desire to 'see' and 'understand' this brave new world (Pagetti 1986, 53; see also Vallorani 1996a, 73–84). As Parrinder points out, "Wells's prose is full of sentences beginning 'He looked', 'He saw', 'He perceived' and the like" (2005, xv). The technological dynamism of the urban scenario frustrates his attempts to comprehend the future, which acquires the trait of a spectacular dream:

And as yet the haze of his vast interval of sleep hung about him, as yet the initial strangeness of his being alive at all in this remote age touched everything with wonder, with a sense of the irrational with something of the quality of a realistic dream. He was still detached, an astonished spectator, still but half involved in life. What he had seen, […] had a spectacular turn, like a thing witnessed from the box of a theatre, "I don't understand," he said. (380)

As the story progresses, a symbolic tension is played out between Graham's inability to grasp the totality of his new condition, and "his frequent ascents to high places" (Draper 1987, 62). These allow him to obtain a privileged perceptual position, matching his ethical, social and financial status: "He saw he had come out upon the roof of the vast city structure which had replaced the miscellaneous houses, streets and open spaces of Victorian London" (*WSW*, 391). Later on, "It was […] quite possible for him to take a bird's-eye view of the city from the crow's nest of the wind-vane keeper" (417).

For almost the entirety of the romance, Graham is merely acted upon (Vallorani 2005, 314). He is given orders – "'You must not stop here,' shouted Howard suddenly at his side. 'You must come away. You must come away'" (WSW, 379) –, and he is treated like a puppet, "'Wave your arm to them,' said Lincoln. 'Wave your arm to them'" (397). Numerous verbs of movement and action referring to him are in the passive voice: "Graham was half led, half thrust, along the passage of blue pillars" (380); "He was being pulled in two directions now […], he was being hoisted in spite of his earned efforts. […] He was lifted up on men's shoulders and carried away from that devouring panel" (459). He often asks others about the course of his action: "'You are my party – the party of the Sleeper?' […] 'What am I to do? […] Remember I understand nothing'" (390). After the revolution, he tells the villainous Ostrog, "I am in your hands" (413). Afterward, he asks Helen "But what am I to do?" (440). An early glimpse of activity can be caught in the "aëreopile" scene of the sixteenth chapter, which prefigures the final battle against Ostrog: "I want to learn more of this machine, […] do you know why I slept two hundred years? To fly! […] I want to do it myself" (433). However, the reader has to wait until the very end of the novel to see Graham become master of his own destiny. After he learns that Ostrog is summoning the much dreaded "negro police" to quell the rebellion, he assumes the role of active charismatic leader that Helen has invoked: "I must see Ostrog forthwith. He has disobeyed me. I have come back to take things out of his hand" (457)[56]. The confusion and sensory difficulties of the beginnings are forthwith forgotten. The roles are now clearly identifiable:

> Slowly the realisation came to the full meaning of these things to him, the perception of the swift change in his position. Ostrog […] was beyond there – the antagonist. There was no one to rule for him any longer. Even the people about him, the leaders and organisers of the multitude, looked to see what he would do, looked to him to act, awaited his orders. He was king indeed. His puppet reign was at an end. (461)

To thoroughly embrace the role of romance hero, Graham needs to relinquish his pensive attitude: "He was desirous of immediate action, he knew he must not think too much in detail of the huge complexity of the struggle about him lest he should be paralysed by the sense of its intricacy" (462). The struggle to save the future and bring about eutopia becomes his new *raison d'être*. When he cannot take part in the fight, he feels "isolated, strangely inactive, inoperative […] inactive he feared the slackening of his will, the return of his doubts, the rediscovery of his inadequacy" (468).

Graham's eutopian metamorphosis also reintroduces the discourse of posthumanity, until then virtually absent from *WSW*'s scenario.[57] The issue emerges during the confrontation with Ostrog, in the nineteenth chapter, in which his villainous plan is revealed. The rebels' leader in fact confesses to have orchestrated the overthrow for his own purposes, and to have exploited the masses: "We had to stir up their discontent, we had to revive the old ideas of universal happiness" (442). He debunks "this vague out-of-date Humanitarianism [that] has revived and spread" (*ibid.*), and claims that the Sleeper-loving people are dangerous animals: "The Crowd is a fool, hysterical and illogical. […] The Crowd is a huge foolish beast. Even if it does not die, it can be still tamed and driven (443). Therefore, Ostrog rejects the "worn out dreams of socialistic order" (457) endorsed by Graham, to put forward his posthuman, oligarchic alternative. In a speech that recalls the words of the artilleryman in *WWs*, he says, "The hope of mankind – what is it? That some day the Over-man may come, that some day the inferior, the weak, and the bestial may be subdued or eliminated. The world is no place for the bad, the stupid, the enervated. Their duty – it's a fine duty too! – is to die. The death of the failure. That is the path by which the beast rose to manhood, by which man goes on to higher things" (443). Then, he adds a dimension of ethical individualism, "There is no Liberty, save wisdom and self-control. Liberty is within – not without. It is each man's own affair. […] The coming of the aristocrat is certain as fate. The end will be the Over-man – for all the mad protests of humanity" (*ibid.*). Ostrog is implying that the next step in human development should be the evolutionary

champion. He auspicates the coming of a superhuman being to 'subdue' or 'eliminate' the weaklings, and to establish an "aristocratic tyranny" (*WSW*, 443).[58]

The motif of the aristocratic 'Over-man' can be seen as a proof of the much debated Nietzschean influence on Wells.[59] In this regard, Bridgham claims that "Though Wells initially disparaged 'the Gospel of Nietzsche' as 'the glorification of a sort of rampant egotism,' it actually chimes with his most enduring convictions and themes, not least the gulf between Nietzsche's 'sick animal, man' and the exceptional individual, and the moral relativism allegedly justified by that disparity" (2006, 13–14). Nonetheless, Bridgwater suggests that "Wells disapproved of the Superman idea and the glorification of the 'master-morality' at the expense of (democratic) 'slave-morality'" (1972, 57), and that in *WSW* "we find what appears to be a straight echo of Nietzsche's doctrine of the Superman as formulated in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Tille's translation of which came out in 1896" (58). To substantiate his argument, Bridgwater claims that Alexander Tille used the word Overman to translate *übermensch*. However, evidence suggests that Tille employed "beyond-man", and that Overman (or the hyphened variant Over-man) would not appear in the translations until later in the twentieth century (see also Ratner-Rosenhagen 2012, 110; Gavaler 2015, 6).[60] However, the word is actually used to translate *übermensch* in the English edition of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, a lengthy work which includes a critique of Nietzsche's thought: "The 'bullies' gratefully recognise themselves in Nietzsche's 'over-man,' and Nietzsche's so-called 'philosophy' is in reality the philosophy of 'bullying'" (Nordau [1892] 1895, 470). Since it is safe to claim that Wells read Nordau's book soon after its publication in the United Kingdom (Bergonzi 1976c, 45), it can be therefore hypothesised that Nietzsche percolated through Wells's works first via Nordau, whose critical stance may have influenced the reception of the German philosopher.

Considering Wells's appropriation and reuse of Nietzsche's ideas in *WSW*, a twofold tension can be identified. On the one hand, it is between Ostrog's 'negative' Over-man – characterised by unethical egotism (Huntington 1982) –, and Graham as 'positive' Over-man, who epitomises the Wellsian, utopian dream to combine socialism and heroic individualism (Vallorani 1996a, 102). In order to remark the symbolic distance from Nietzsche and Ostrog's godless nihilism, the Sleeper assumes the messianic traits of a resurrected saviour, who meets his 'passion' piloting an airplane (Pagetti 1986, 59). On the other hand, the opposition is between monadic and collective superhumanity. As Cantor suggests, "Wells managed to combine faith in socialist doctrine with the belief that only a kind of Nietzschean superman

could successfully implement it. He believed that if society is to be saved, it cannot be by a collective effort, but only by the work of a single great man, or perhaps a band of great men" (1999, 102).

This dualism between "single great man" and "band of great men" is the key to understanding the development and following influence of Wells's literary invention. In particular, the way in which the Sleeper, as 'builder of utopias' (Pagetti 1986, 66), prefigures the eutopian superheroes of Anglo-American superhero comics. Following the path defined by Griffin, Graham remains an example of triumphant individualism. Even though he may be said to represent "the abrupt, inexplicable emergence of a collective will" (Draper 1987, 63), he does not prefigure a race of superhumans. Whereas this form of monadic and euergetic (super)heroism – with all the totalitarian implications thereof – will prove to be immensely popular in American pulp sci-fi and comics, after *WSW* Wells seems to relinquish this conception. He favours a group or even collective superhumanity, as the positive counterpart to Ostrog's race of aristocratic Over-men. It can be hypothesised that the reason for Wells's preference towards this superhuman communitarianism lies in its greater suitability for the utopian project. It harmonises with the dream of a modern "evolutionary utopia", in which "each inhabitant is responsible for her or his own place and involvement" (Busch 2009, 14). An early example can be seen in *The Food of the Gods and How It Came to Earth*, in which the race of Giants is described as the next step in human development, albeit unable to coexist with the 'normal' people (see Coogan 2006, 131–32). The motif constantly resurfaces in Wells's later writings, as in the intellectual elite of the Samurai in *MU*, which prefigures the collective superhumanity of *Men Like Gods* (Kumar 1987, 218). It also can be seen as informing the rather abstract concepts of "Mind of the Race" and "Open Conspiracy", i.e. "a voluntary co-operation of such giants for the re-ordering of the world" (Batchelor 1985, 68). The rearticulation of the overman notion as collective project is made explicit in the 1926 novel *The World of William Clissold*. The eponymous character – arguably Wells's diegetic surrogate – in fact states that

> Neither Nietzsche's Overman nor Shaw's Superman was really to be thought of as an individual person. Both were plainly the race development, the whole race in progress. But writers with the journalistic instinct to caricature got hold of these ideas and cheapened them irremediably, and the popular interpretation of these phrases, the Overman and the Superman, had come to be not a communion of saints but an entirely ridiculous individual figure, a swagger, a provocative mingling of Napoleon Bonaparte, Antinous, and the Admirable Crichton.(Herbert George Wells [1926] 1933, 67)

Here Wells is thus suggesting that "Although the Overman, the Superman, and the Superior Person are grammatically singular, they are group concepts that refer to the human species as a whole, a world organism" (Moxley 1999, 134).

The contrast between Graham and the negative Over-man is only one of the binary oppositions that underpin the narrative structure of *WSW*. Among these dichotomies – sleep/awakening, luxury/poverty, capitalism/socialism –, the most significant is rooted in what John Huntington defines as the "Two-World Structure" in Wells's fiction (1981; see also Vallorani 1996a, 14). The scholar argues that "The co-existence of opposites is a fundamental structural element in all of Wells's early fiction. […] That this 'two-world' structure is important to Wells's imagination is shown by the comparatively large number of stories in which he develops no plot or moral, but in which he takes considerable pains simply to establish a juxtaposition of two incongruous worlds" (1981, 240). In *WSW*, these two counterpoised worlds are clearly Graham's Victorian era and the year 2100.[61]

My point is that not only does the symbolic opposition provide Graham with the instruments for his superheroic, eutopian project – "My age was an age of dreams – or beginnings, an age of noble hopes" (*WSW*, 465) –, but it also enables the cognitive exploration of modernity. Through the juxtaposition of a contemporary and an hypertechnological historical moment, *WSW* partakes in the aesthetic experience of cultural modernism. This is made possible by the inherent inhomogeneity of the modern condition, i.e. the idea that "Modernism must thus be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development […]: the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history" (Jameson 1991, 307). In *WSW*, the perception of the 'modern' thus becomes a dialectical oscillation between the reader's empirical (and now historicised) framework, and the defamiliarized extrapolation. Moreover, in suggesting that a Victorian discourse (Graham's socialism) may be used to amend a vision of the future, Wells's romance (partly) shares the tradition of "modern art", which "glorified, celebrated, and dramatized older forms of individual production which the new mode of production was elsewhere on the point of displacing and blotting out" (*ibid*.). Even though it never entails a full rejection of modernity, *WSW* somehow represents the popular and didactic counterpart of creative endeavour "which would administer to and correct the 'modern world'" (Brooker 1992, 6).

The most visible divergence between Wells and literary modernism proper lies in the different aesthetic patterns. While the latter elaborates a radically innovative approach to

representing the mundane experience of naturalistic fiction – what Raymond Williams calls "a series […] of breaks in forms" ([1985] 1992, 90) –, the former employs a conventional style to depict the wondrous imaginings of science and romance (Draper 1987, 33). Modernists replace the method of observation, Wells the observed thing.[62] In this regard, the representational strategies employed in *WSW* revolve around the fundamental ambivalence of modernity, characterized by "continual excitement; the promise of technological and social progress", but also by "the poverty and squalor of industrial cities", accompanied by "ambiguity; doubt; risk; continual change" (Barker 2003, 191). As Chialant suggests, "In *When the Sleeper Wakes*, […] there emerges a sense of wonder at the technological innovations of modern architecture such as the glass-domed city. But Wells also warns that the triumph of the metropolis would lead to the apocalypse of industrial civilization" (Chialant 2005, 208).

Via the diegetic gaze of Graham, we first experience the unfathomable vastness of the technological sublime:

> His first impression was one of overwhelming astonishment at the greatness of the architecture that opened out as he came down the passage. […] The place into which he looked was an aisle of Titanic buildings, curving away in a spacious sweep in either direction; overhead mighty cantilevers sprang together across the huge width of the place, and a tracery of some translucent material shut out the sky. Gigantic globes of cool white light shamed the pale sunbeams that filtered down through the girders and wires. Here and there a gossamer suspension bridge dotted with foot-passengers flung across the chasm and the air was webbed with slender cables. (*WSW*, 378)

In spite of the "Titanic" dimensions of the architecture, the future metropolis is far from being static. The observer in fact perceives a sense of hyperkinetic dynamism, symbolised by the moving ways (see Chialant 2005, 214–15):

> But this roadway was three hundred feet across, and it moved; it moved all save the middle, the lowest part. For a moment, the motion dazzled his mind. Then he understood.
> Under the balcony this extraordinary roadway ran swiftly to Graham's right, an endless flow rushing along as fast as a nineteenth century express train, an endless platform of narrow transverse overlapping rods with little interspaces that permitted it to follow the curvature of the street. (*WSW*, 378)

Because of its sublimity, the megalopolis triggers both attraction and fear. To a certain extent, it seems to have been deanthropized, and to exist as antithesis to its inhabitants. It is

described as a Leviathan, with "monstrous wheels" (392), that has "swallowed up humanity" (419).[63]

> But the broad stretch of level before them was a ghastly white, broken only by gigantic masses and moving shapes and lengthy strips of impenetrable darkness, vas ungainly Titans of shadow. All about them, huge metallic structures, iron girders, inhumanly vast as it seemed to him, interlaced, and the edges of wind wheels, scarcely moving in the lull, passed in great shining curves steeper and steeper up into a luminous haze. (392)

The same ambivalence is reserved to the masses of people. On the one hand, they serve as Graham's ideological legitimation, "I believe in the people" (*WSW*, 457). On the other hand, they epitomize the fin-de-siècle anxieties for the processes of massification and depersonalization characterising urban modernity (Vallorani 1996a, 85–94): "monstrous crowds, packed masses of indistinguishable people clamouring his name, hailing him Master" (396).

Extrapolating from the trends of Victorian London, Wells also magnifies the "semiotic shift occurring in the urban living space at the turn of the century" (Balzer 2010, 25–26), i.e. the pervasiveness of signs and advertisements on the city surface:

> A cliff of edifice hung above him, he perceived as he glanced upward, and the opposite façade was grey and dim and broken by great archings, circular projections, myriads of vast windows, and an intricate scheme of architectural relief. Athwart these horizontally and obliquely ran inscriptions in an unfamiliar lettering. (*WSW*, 378)

> The platform slanted up on either side, and the tall buildings rose beyond, vast dim ghosts, their inscriptions and advertisements indistinctly seen, and up through the girder and cables was a faint interrupted ribbon of the pallid sky. (400)

> He was so preoccupied with these details that it was only just as he was leaving the place that he remarked the huge advertisement dioramas that marched majestically along the upper walls and proclaimed the most remarkable commodities. (447–48)

> Everywhere was violent advertisement, until his brain swam at the tumult of light and colour. And Babble Machines of a peculiarly rancid tone were abundant and filled the air with strenuous squealing and an idiotic slang. (452)

In his warning against the commodification and corporatization of the public and private space (K. Williams 2007, 73–74), Wells therefore envisages the urban textualization described by Walter Benjamin, "Printing, having found in the book a refuge in which to lead an

autonomous existence, is pitilessly dragged out onto the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos" (1979, 62)

Among the different representational strategies employed to depict his "nightmare of capitalism triumphant" (Herbert George Wells [1910] 2005, 8), the least analysed concerns the Americanization of Future London. However, the importance of the United States as 'raw material' for Wells's utopian imaginings should not be underestimated, especially if we consider his own personal experience, and the enduring influence of his work. As Parrinder argues, "[*WSW*'s] principal features are American rather than English, just as the novel's skyscrapers were taking shape in *fin-de-siècle* Chicago and New York rather than in London" (2005, xvi). The scholar also points out that the word "trust", used by Wells to define the subsidiaries of the "Council of Trustees" (*WSW*, 410), evokes the 'corporate trusts' that proliferated in the US during the gilded age, and that started being 'busted' right at the turn of the century.[64] *WSW* imagines the large-scale consequences of a possible failure of these anti-trust policies. It may be added that the romance dramatizes the historical process by which companies started to exploit the trust instrument to constitute groups of large, monopolistic businesses:[65]

> Through the successive phases in the development of this mechanical civilization, aiding and presently directing its development, there had grown a new power, the Council, the board of his trustees. At first it had been […] a mere property-holding company, the creation of two childless testators' whims, but the collective talents of its first constitution had speedily guided it to a vast influence, until, by title deed, loan and share, under a hundred disguises and pseudonyms it had ramified through the fabric of American and English States. (422)

The idea that *WSW* articulates an Americanised vision of the future is confirmed by the ways in which the romance's themes and imagery resurface in *The Future in America* (1906, hereinafter *FA*), Wells's travel diary of his first trip to the US. For instance, when he discusses the American economic system, he criticises "the anarchic and irresponsible control of private owners – how dangerous and horrible that control may become the Railway and Beef Trust investigations have shown" (Herbert George Wells 1906, 119). However, in a classic Wellsian gesture, he confesses a "sneaking liking" (101) for Rockefeller, "this much reviled man", whom Wells sees as "the quintessential [product] of a distorted American environment" (Frankel 2007, 89)[66]. Speaking of these so-called 'robber barons', he also makes an explicit reference to the 'overman':

These financial leaders are […] are men with a good deal of contempt for legislation and state interference, but that is no distinction, it has unhappily been part of the training of the average American citizen, and they have no doubt exceeded the letter if not the spirit of the laws of business competition. They have played to win and not for style, and if they personally had not done so somebody else would; they fill a position which from the nature of things, somebody is bound to fill. They have, no doubt, carried sharpness to the very edge of dishonesty, but what else was to be expected from the American conditions? […]. It is ridiculous, I say, to write of these men as though they were unparalleled villains, intellectual overmen, conscienceless conquerors of the world. (*FA,* 100)

Besides the issue of trusts and monopolies, the most significant portion is the description of the North American metropolises, which somehow resemble the London of *WSW*:

My first impressions of New York are impressions enormously to enhance the effect of this Progress, this material progress, that is to say, as something inevitable and inhuman, as a blindly furious energy of growth that must go on. […] The sky-scrapers that are the New-Yorker s perpetual boast and pride rise up to greet one as one comes through the Narrows into the Upper Bay, stand out, in a clustering group of tall irregular crenellations, the strangest crown that ever a city wore. (*FA*, 35)

Wells repeatedly stresses the largeness and the 'inhuman' quality of New York, two features he had already attributed to the Sleeper's future. Even the New Yorkers recall the romance's indistinguishable masses of people:

The individuals count for nothing, they are clerks and stenographers, shop-men, shop-girls, workers of innumerable types, black coated men, hat-and-blouse girls, shabby and cheaply clad persons, such as one sees in London, in Berlin, anywhere. Perhaps they hurry more, perhaps they seem more eager. But the distinctive effect is the mass, the black torrent, rippled with un meaning faces, the great, the unprecedented multitudinousness of the thing, the inhuman force of it all (*FA*, 38–39)

When dealing with the American proletariat, Wells experiences Graham's linguistic difficulties. Whereas the latter "could not understand their thick speech" (*WSW*, 456), the former is "answered in some totally incomprehensible tongue" (*FA*, 136) by a member of the "vast torrent of strangers, speaking alien tongues, inspired by alien traditions" that pours in "the lower levels of the American community" (134).

The similarity between the imagined utopian city, and his portrayal of the 'real' New York confirms that Wells actually saw the latter as "the city of the future" (Kumar 1987, 172).

Chicago also shares a number of traits with the London of 2100, especially in its most unpleasant aspects:

> It is the most perfect presentation of nineteenth-century individualistic industrialism I have ever seen in its vast, its magnificent squalor; it is pure nineteenth century […]. "Undisciplined" – that is the word or Chicago. It is the word for all the progress of the Victorian time, a scrambling, ill-mannered, undignified, unintelligent development of material resources. (*FA*, 60)

This impression is confirmed by Wells himself, who in the first chapter writers that

> In my case that phase produced a book, *When the Sleeper Wakes*, in which, I am told, by competent New-Yorkers, that I, starting with London, an unbiassed mind, this rule-of-three method and my otherwise unaided imagination, produced something more like Chicago than any other place wherein righteous men are likely to be found. (*FA*, 8)

In spite of the numerous critical aspects he identifies in the American nation, Wells concludes his report on a positive note: "it seems to me that in America, by sheer virtue of its size, its free traditions, and the habit of initiative in its people, the leadership of progress must ultimately rest" (257).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the duty of building utopia, or at least imagining it, crosses the Atlantic. And in the fertile ground of American pulp literature, Wells's early works are rediscovered for a new generation of readers. In spite of all the scepticism towards the future, caused by the First World War and later by the Great Depression, the scientific romances and "fantasias of possibilities" continue to charm an increasingly sophisticated fandom. In particular, *WSW*, reprinted in *Amazing Stories Quarterly* in 1928, wields an enduring influence on the literary anticipations of the twentieth century: "Later writers will pick up the essential situation Wells has posed and develop it in further directions, but the deep structural contradiction cannot be mediated" (Huntington 1981, 1264). The fruitful ambiguity, the complex vision of the future, the exploration of modernity, and Graham's utopian superhumanity constitute a vast repertoire of motifs and images whose intertextual significance is still to be adequately understood.

In those very years, new readers-turned-creators appropriate the formulas of the masters. They aim at producing their own vision of 'scientifiction', and use it to voice the anxieties of their age. New forms and genres are experimented, in a mass-market that allows both for lurid

escapism and avant-garde experimentation. In those very years, comics emerge as a new, revolutionary narrative medium, capable of gathering different artistic and literary suggestions, and representing the sensory implications of modernity. With comics, pulp sci-fi hence finds a new dimension of imaginative inventiveness, mostly due to the spontaneous hybridization with other popular genres. In particular, a new archetype is ready to leave an indelible mark in American and Western mass culture. It is the down of the superhero. It is the age of the Superman.

2 H.G. Wells in American Popular Culture: From Pulp Fiction to Superhero Comics

Is America a giant childhood or a gigantic futility, a mere latest phase of that long succession of experiments which has been and may be for interminable years – may be indeed altogether until the end – man's social history?

H.G. Wells, *The Future in America* (1906)

We repeat: the superman exists, and he's American.

Alan Moore, *Watchmen* (1986-87)

In order to scrutinize Wells's influence on the birth and development of the superhero genre, I take into account two early twentieth-century interrelated phenomena: on the one hand, the circulation of Wells's works in the US; on the other, the formulation of Wellsian themes and motifs by American authors, which were or were not directly influenced by the British writer. In this regard, three texts exemplify the narrative and symbolic link among Wells's scientific romance, American 'scientifiction', and superhero comics: Upton Sinclair's *The Overman* (1907), Philip Wylie's *Gladiator* (1930), and Jerry Siegel's "The Reign of the Super-Man" (1933, illustrated by Joe Shuster). Not only do these three works epitomize different modes of appropriation and contamination, but also suggest the extent to which myths of superhumanity (Maffi [1981] 2013, 38; G. Jones 2004, 80) and utopianism (Kumar 1987, 69–98) were embedded in American culture. In particular, *Gladiator*, whose main character may be seen as "the most immediate prototype for Superman" (Andrae 1980, 90), constitutes the 'missing link' between Wells's romances and twentieth-century comics *übermenschen*.

After considering the literary sources, I take into account the ways in which tropes are (re)articulated in and through the comics medium. It thus becomes necessary to examine the process of remediation in a different representational system. As Mila Bongco points out, "While sharing many themes, images, and even characters with these other popular forms of expression, comics deviate in their narrational activity by using an intricate interaction of words and pictures" (2000, 54). In analysing the *Superman* (1938) and *Bat-Man* (1939) comic book series, I consider a twofold exploration of modernity: the first is semiotic, and concerns comics' capability of representing, like modernisms, "a new urban experience" (Brooker 1996, 20). Popularizing the aesthetic innovations of the avant-garde, comic strips and books express the fragmentation and precariousness of city life, not differently from modernist montage (see Barker 2003, 193–94). The second mode of exploration is compositional and thematic. It revolves around the ways in which early superhero comics appropriate the formulas of popular narratives, and use them to remould the utopian uncertainty of Wells's romances and American pulp sci-fi. This produces a structural ambivalence about the notions of progress and technological advancement, of which the superhero is both product and antithesis (see Locke 2005; Morrison 2012, 6–21). At the same time, the generic contamination contributes to stifle the utopian potentialities of the superhero archetype. They would remain dormant for almost forty years, until the revisionist attempts of the 1980s. I inspect the causes for this process, which arguably include editorial needs – the open-ended serialization –, but also political reasons – the increasing self-censorship of the industry. The latter started in 1940 (G. Jones 2004, 165), and culminated with the post-war "great comics scare", fuelled by Fredric Wertham's highly influential *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954).

2.1 Wells's *Amazing Stories*

In 1928, the success of *Amazing Stories* (1926) prompted Hugo Gernsback to launch a new magazine, *Amazing Stories Quarterly*. Michael Ashley describes it as "a real bonanza. 144 large-size pages for 50 cents, carrying two novels and several short stories" (2000, 55). The very first issue includes a reprint of Wells's *WSW*, [1] which is also featured on Frank R. Paul's cover art. Gernsback describes the romance in enthusiastic terms:

> If one were to ask us for the names of the five greatest scientific stories that have been written so far, one of the five would unquestionably be, "WHEN THE SLEEPER WAKES." Few stories of the scientifiction type are as absorbing or grip your imagination with such intensity as does this story. The theme of a man waking up after a 200 year sleep may not be so novel in itself, but under Wells' treatment it certainly becomes the outstanding story of its class of all times. […] While this story was written years ago, before the advent of the aeroplane, it still remains true in practically every way. Mr. Wells not only anticipated the aeroplane and to a good extent, broadcasting, as it has come to pass, but he anticipated many other inventions, some of which we are still ignorant of, though they are certain to be realized. If you want to know what the world will very likely look like 200 years from now, read this masterpiece. (1928, 56)

Gernsback glosses over the disturbing anti-utopian implications of Wells's romance. Instead, he stresses the extrapolative and futurological aspect, i.e. Wells's capacity to foresee "many other inventions" of the year 2100. Gernsback also emphasises the educational value of this particular work – "If you want to know" –, in accordance with his idea of science fiction as instrument of "scientific popularization and education" (Mendlesohn 2009, 54).

This was not the first time that Wells's fiction had been reprinted in a magazine run by the Luxembourgish-American editor. In fact, the writer was featured in each of the first 29 issues of *Amazing Stories* (Ashley 2000, 51). The series of Wellsian reprints was inaugurated by the short story "The New Accelerator", followed in the second issue by "The Crystal Egg" – probably the piece of Wells's early fiction closest to Gernsback's interest in radio electronics. Later on, *Amazing Stories* also serialised classics like *SDC*, *IM*, or *IDM*.[2] As Williamson points out, Gernsback's choice to reprint the early fiction of Wells's somehow contradicts his own view on sci-fi: "There's an odd anomaly here, in the fact that Gernsback built his first science fiction magazines so largely on the starkly pessimistic work of the early Wells, for Gernsback presented himself as the optimistic prophet of progress through popular science" (1973, 7).

Setting aside the ideological affinity between editor and writer, it is unquestionable that Gernsback contributed to the spread of Wells's works on the other side of the Atlantic. There had already been American editions of his early fiction. His first romance, *The Time Machine*, was published first in the US, and only three weeks later in the UK (Hammond 2004, 48). Prior to the volume edition, pirated editions of *WWs* – strategically set in Boston or New York rather than Woking – were serialized in American newspapers (Parrinder in Herbert George Wells [1898] 2005, xxxii). However, Gernsback managed to popularize Wells for a whole new generation of science fiction enthusiasts (Williamson 1973, 6; D. C. Smith 1986, 76). Wells started being known and appreciated among younger readers, many of which would soon

become creators themselves, like Jack Williamson. In the late 1920s, these young Americans were "the first generation to grow up with access to an alternate universe provided by commercial entertainment" (G. Jones 2004, 35). The sense of belonging was not created by class, religion of ethnicity, but by the consumption of fictional products. A fandom was being born, and Wells was at the root of it.

In this regard, Wells's incorporation in the galaxy of pulp sci-fi is also to be analysed with reference to the secondary aspects of Gernsback's work. These can be seen as a series of cultural dynamics into which the Wells – along with other European and American authors – was integrated. First of all, it is necessary to consider the historiographic activity. Through his editorials, Gernsback attempted to define the chronological and thematic boundaries of the genre, becoming "the first person to create and announce something resembling a history of SF" (Westfahl 1992, 340). In his first editorial for *Amazing Stories*, he famously states that "By 'scientifiction' I mean the Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe type of story – a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision" (Gernsback quoted in Westfahl 1992, 342).[3] According to Carlo Pagetti, this programmatic statement expresses the structural ambiguities of Gernsbackian sci-fi, in which the imaginative tradition of the fantastic is framed by a presumption of scientific certitude ([1970] 2012, 131–32). Didacticism – somehow already present in Wells's vision (see McLean 2009, 25) – is also a constitutive feature, for "It was Gernsback's firm belief – and it always remained so – that readers would be instructed through science fiction" (Ashley 2000, 50). However biased and limiting Gernsback's account was, and despite the involuntary ghettoization of science fiction (Ashley 2000, 58), the importance of his systematization is paramount.[4]

The choice of Verne and Wells as foundational authors suggests the European character of early American sci-fi (Pagetti [1970] 2012, 132). This cultural legacy parallels the non-American origin of several genre's initiators. Gernsback himself was born in Luxemburg, and emigrated to the US at the age of twenty years (Ashley 2000, 28). Some of his collaborators were also of European origin, like *Amazing Stories* cover artist Frank R. Paul. In addition, Gernsback can be said to epitomize the significant amount of Jewish sci-fi editors and creators, with Isaac Asimov as most famous representative (Pagetti [1970] 2012, 133–34). To assess causes and consequences of this religious and ethnic specialization goes far beyond the scope of this work. However, the Mitteleuropean-Jewish root of much early twentieth-century American popular culture must not be ignored (see G. Jones 2004, 128). In fact, not only the

presence of first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants was strongly felt in the pulp landscape, but also had a determining role in the nascent film and comics industries.[5]

Another corollary to Gernsback's editorial activity concerned the creation of a network of enthusiasts, who were often creators themselves (Gardner 2012, 68–69). Since the ninth issue of *Amazing Stories* (December 1926), he in fact invited readers to submit their own short stories, with the chance of winning a monetary prize ($250), and being published in the magazine (Ashley 2000, 52). In the following issue he also established a letter column, entitled "Discussions, that triggered the active participation of readers: "In this department we shall discuss, every month, topics of interest to all of our readers. The editors invite correspondence on all subject directly or indirectly related to the stories appearing in this magazine" (Gernsback 1927, 970). Initially, only readers' name and location were provided, but later *Amazing Stories* started printing the full address, allowing private correspondence between fans. As Tom Moylan notes, the conversation between readers and editors – and among readers themselves – may be seen as the inception of sci-fi criticism:

> This material prompted readerly responses, editorial replies, and then more response and debate; and later (especially by the 1950s) this popular critical discourse expanded into the explicit form of book reviews and implicitly in the schemes and selections of literature checklists, annotated bibliographies, and "year's best" and thematic anthologies that were produced in the marketplace outside the walls of academia. (Moylan 2000b, 37)

In a decade, this virtual network of aficionados would produce social gatherings, as the World Science Fiction Convention, first held in New York in 1939. The community created in/by sci-fi pulp magazines was also responsible for the birth of 'fanzines' (Reid 2009, 205–6).[6] As Ashley points out, "It was not too surprising that before long fans would seek to produce their own fiction magazine" (2000, 80). Even though no copies have survived, *Cosmic Stories* is arguably the earliest known sci-fi fanzine, produced in 1929 or 1930 by a Cleveland Jewish teenager named Jerome Siegel.[7] Siegel was an *Amazing Stories* reader, and an avid scientifiction fan (Daniels 1998, 11; G. Jones 2004, 29–31). He even sent a letter to the magazine, published in the August 1929 issue, asking for "another cover (story) contest" (Siegel, quoted in Bradley 2012). Some years later he would create, along with artist Joe Shuster, the first comic-book superhero *Superman*.

Jerry Siegel epitomizes the unidirectional permeability between pulp sci-fi and comics in the first half of the century. In this regard, *Amazing Stories* played a twofold role. On the one

hand, it popularized the classics, juxtaposing the European tradition of Verne and Wells with more recent, variously pulp American writers. The genre was hence formulated, historicized, and discussed by a competent fandom. On the other hand, the magazine (and its imitators) inspired those very writers and artists who would soon establish the comic-book industry. Joe Shuster recollects that he and Siegel "were both great science-fiction fans, reading *Amazing Stories* and *Wonder Stories* in those days" (Shuster in Andrae, Blum, and Coddington 1983, 8). And it is surely in those magazines that Shuster knew Wells, of which he claims to have been "an avid reader" (*ibid.*). *Amazing* also directly generated what is considered as the first non-humorous science fiction comic strip. Philip Nowlan and Dick Calkins's *Buck Rogers*, serialized since January 1929, was in fact adapted from Nowlan's short story *Armageddon 2419 AD*, published in the August 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories* (Restaino 2004, 63; G. Jones 2004, 72). Along with Hal Foster's *Tarzan*, which premiered on the very same day, *Buck Rogers* sealed in a definite way "the marriage between pulps and comic strips" (Sabin 1996, 53). These two series suggested that the medium could articulate "archetypal story forms in terms of specific cultural materials" (Cawelti 1976, 6). And whereas comics were ready for genre fiction, they were ready for (super)heroes.

2.2 America, Utopianism and Superhumanity

Wells's influential permanence in the pulp landscape suggests the relevance of his literary production to an American audience. This points to the fact that the themes and ideas developed in his scientific romances constituted a shared discourse in American culture and literature. For instance, *WSW* – the text that inaugurated *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, and that I identify as possible precursor to superhero comics – is structured around the dialectic of utopianism and superhumanity. I would argue that these notions resonate with the American *Weltanschauung* of the early nineteenth century, and they are variously investigated in literary works as Sinclair's *The Overman*, Wylie's *Gladiator*, and Siegel's "The Reign of the Super-Man".

Since the early stages of European colonization, utopianism had been deeply woven into American culture. Initially seen as a ready-made Earthly Paradise, the continent was soon reconceptualised as a savage, virgin land. America could be transformed into a utopia, but only through hard work and self-reliance (Kumar 1987, 71–73). The 'howling wilderness' had to be

conquered: "for Jefferson, as for the Puritans, America's pastoral utopia was the product of design, enterprise and toil. America was potentially a cultivated garden, halfway between the wilderness of untouched nature and the refinement (too many) of commercial urban society" (74). According to Kumar, the centrality of utopianism in American culture is the reason why proper utopian literature did not flourish until the very end of the nineteenth century (81; see also Maffi [1981] 2013, 36). Since the US were already a utopia, or at least a framework for possible utopias (a "metautopia"), there was little to no reason to imagine a fictional project of betterment. Instead, American utopianism translated into a variety of "intentional utopian communities" (Murphy 2009, 480), first appearing in the seventeenth century. [8] These intentional societies were both religious/sectarian and secular, and mostly embraced socialism and economic communitarianism (Kumar 1987, 80–91; see Sargent 1994, 17 for a taxonomy). They generated a large corpus of reports and commentaries, before disappearing between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

It is not coincidental that utopian literature proper developed in the US when experimental communitarianism was in decline (see Segal 2012, 29). Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), "the most famous nineteenth-century literary utopia" (Roemer 2010, 92), reconceived utopianism for Gilded Age America.[9] Non only did the novel signal the formal shift "from philosophic dialogue to utopian romance" (Fitting 1987, 29), but it also

> aspired to offer a solution in terms of a socialist utopia fully equal to the scale and complexity of late nineteenth century industrial America. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century utopia did not die out in America; it changed its form. The small-scale experimental community, itself the product largely of European theory, was displaced in favour of the new European model of national, scientific, socialism. Only something of this kind could hope to counter the competing model of a triumphant capitalism that was all too present in the real world. (Kumar 1987, 96)

Bellamy was uncomfortable with the label 'socialist',[10] even though his vision could hardly be defined in a different way. He describes a collaborative society, with planned cities, in which every citizen is guaranteed education and employment up to the age of 45. *Looking Backward* envisages a peaceful transition from the chaos of trusts and *laissez-faire* capitalism to a single state monopoly:

> The industry and commerce of the country, ceasing to be conducted by a set of irresponsible corporations and syndicates of private persons at their caprice and for their profit, were intrusted to a single syndicate representing the people, to be conducted in the common

interest for the common profit. The nation, that is to say, organized as the one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed; it became the one capitalist in the place of all other capitalists, the sole employer, the final monopoly in which all previous and lesser monopolies were swallowed up, a monopoly in the profits and economies of which all citizens shared. (1888, 77–78)

The idea that state socialism could arise from corporate trusts represents one of the major divergences between Bellamy's work and Wells's *WSW*, in which the two phenomena are presented as antithetical.

As a "technological utopia" (Fortunati 2001, 139), *Looking Backward* also suggests the centrality of science and technology in American utopianism. Technological expertise had already been a significant factor during the early stages of European colonization. It reinforced the symbolical and material divide between settlers and natives, while enabling the institutionalization of slavery as economic system (see Zinn [1980] 2015, 25–26). Throughout the nineteenth century, America's utopian dream was woven into a narrative of progress, in which "technology and material growth [found] a secure and increasingly central place" (Kumar 1987, 77; see also Sargent 1994, 21). According to Edward Segal, the notions of progress and technological development came to be virtually indistinguishable

America was to be a *probable*, not merely a possible, utopia that would come about primarily by scientific and technological changes. Indeed, scientific and technological progress equaled *progress itself*, not merely the means to progress; scientific and technological utopia was to be modeled on the scientific instruments and machines that made it probable (Segal 2012, 75, emphasis in the original).

These intellectual and literary trends informed the protean character of American utopianism in the twentieth century. The cultural specificity was reflected in the various aspects of the "Utopian program", which Jameson defines as "political practices", written texts, "intentional communities", and the projection of "new spatial totalities, in the aesthetic of the city itself" (Jameson 2005, 3). The foundational utopian trends most visibly resurfaced, albeit in an updated form, during the utopian revival of the 1960s and 1970s. As Moylan suggests, "utopian expression became a major element of the oppositional projects of the postwar decades. Reviving after a nineteenth-century heyday, the literary utopia, intentional communities, and utopian social thought began again to flourish" (Moylan 2000, 68; see also Jameson 1991, 160).

It indisputable that utopianism has also percolated through the different domains of American popular culture. To a certain extent, utopia as a concept can even be argued to

underpin the narrative structure of much genre fiction. My point is that the notion of 'ideal society' is central to the "American monomyth", an "archetypal plot formula" described by Lawrence and Jewett as

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 6)[11]

The utopian quality of the "monomythic Eden" (22) is self-evident. Codified by the Lawrence and Jewett as a "millennial, religious expectation" (46), the "community in a harmonious paradise" is in fact semantically close to Sargent's "non-existent society […] that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived" (1994, 9). The monomythic formula appears thus to mobilize the static quality of traditional utopias, jeopardizing the idyllic harmony that constitutes its ontological status. The pattern is circular, for eutopia constitutes both the starting point and the object of the heroic action (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 22). In this regard, the American monomyth also suggests the importance of the 'superhero', who restores the community back to the utopian potentiality. S/he is characterised by sexual abnegation, and by "disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers" (47). This archetypal figure – prefigured by *WSW*'s Graham – fully crystallized in American popular culture during the "axial decade" of monomythic development, beginning in 1929 (36). These were the years of the Great Depression, in which superhero comics were born.

The monomythic superhero can be seen as an articulation of another potent myth of American modernity, i.e. superhumanity. In the first decades of the twentieth century, different kinds of superhuman characters were ideated, scrutinized and debated in popular and 'less' popular fiction. As Gerard Jones points out, "The 'superman' was scarcely a new idea and was in fact a common motif of both high and low culture by the early Thirties, the inevitable product of those doctrines of perfectibility promoted by everyone from Bernarr MacFadden to Leon Trotsky" (2004, 80). Early examples of variously superhuman characters can be found in the dime novels. Larger-than-life heroic figures inhabited the frontier and the city, the major chronotopical settings in nineteenth-century American popular literature (Maffi [1981] 2013, 43, 51). One of the most celebrated frontier heroes is Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the*

Woods (1837), who can said to inaugurate the "dual-identity avenger-vigilante" trend (Coogan 2006, 150; see also Gavaler 2014, 107).[12] Nick's urban counterpart is the private detective Nick Carter, created in 1886 by John R. Coryel, and revived in 1933 for the pulp market. As a prototype for Dashiell Hammett's and Raymond Chandler's hardboiled PIs, Carter demonstrated that the frontier avenger could be relocated into the threatening environment of the modern city (Scaggs 2005, 56). Here, he successfully fights crime thanks to his superhuman physical prowess, "having the strength of two men, or perhaps more as he can lift a horse" (Coogan 2006, 153).

The 1930s Nick Carter is only one of the numerous *übermenschen* that populated the pulp landscape. The most famous and influential were E.R. Burroughs's Tarzan, first appearing in *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912); Walter B. Gibson's *The Shadow*, created as mysterious radio narrator in 1930 and developed as literary character the following year; and the globetrotter adventurer Doc Savage, ideated by Lester Dent in 1933. These characters were explicitly defined as 'supermen' (Coogan 2006, 158–62, 190), were adapted to other media, and variously influenced the creation of *Superman* and *Batman*. The pre-WW2 proliferation of pulp superheroes was paralleled – and arguably facilitated – by several phenomena, as the popularization of Nietzsche's ideas by H.G. Wells, G.B. Shaw, and Jack London (Bridgwater 1972, 155; Ratner-Rosenhagen 2012, 112–13), and the increasing currency of eugenic theories in American society (Gavaler 2014).

A rich strand of literary supermen (and superwomen) was developed in American science fiction. As in Wells's scientific romances, these works explored the ontological complexities of evolution and posthumanity, often raising philosophical and ethical questions. One of the most influential sci-fi supermen is John Carter, created by E.R. Burroughs in the 1912 novel *A Princess of Mars*. John Carter's significance lies in the subversion of the paradigm established by Mary Shelley and consolidated by H.G. Wells, whose early posthuman beings were described as "sympathetic but always monstrous, threatening, and socially deviant" (Andrae 1980, 86). Later pre-*Superman* texts exploring the science-fictional possibilities of superhumanity tend to follow the Wellsian model. In these tales, the superhuman is presented as possible "ruler, savior, [or] destroyer" (Coogan 2006, 134) of the human race. S/he is often bored and/or isolated because of their superiority, and is ultimately unable to coexist with 'regular' humankind. Those works include: Philip Wylie's *The Gladiator* (1930) and *The Murderer Invisible* (1931); John Taine's (pseudonym of mathematician Eric Temple Bell)

Seeds of Life (1931), first published in *Amazing Stories Quarterly* and later reprinted as stand-alone novel, in which a superman is created with the aid of X-rays; Stanley G. Weinbaum's *The New Adam* (1934, published posthumously in 1939), in which a bored *übermensch* attempts to find his place in human society, and "The Adaptive Ultimate" (published in *Amazing Stories* in 1935), a short story about an invulnerable, murderous superwoman.

Another minor and distinctly Wellsian subset of American literature revolves around the relationship between superhumanity and socialism. Already present in *WSW* and *The Food of the Gods*, this seemingly contradictory association parallels the ideological confusion of the early American socialist movement, in which the superman idea coexisted with a vision of social reform (Maffi [1981] 2013, 175). The philosophical bases of these politically-engaged supermen were both European and autochthonous. Friedrich Nietzsche, often popularized by other authors, and Benjamin De Casserer, known as the 'American Nietzsche', served as the theoretical background for a socialist interpretation of the superman doctrine (174). As Geoffrey Harpham points out, "Vulgarized Nietzcheanism had a direct influence on some socialists who saw society following the superman in evolving toward a condition of superior humanity" (1975, 23–24). The Nietzchean socialist Upton Sinclair discusses the correlation in *Mammonart,* "I have met with ridicule from sapient critics for praising Zarathustra and at the same time proclaiming myself a Socialist. But just as it is possible by a deeper view to reconcile Zarathustra and Jesus, so also it is possible to reconcile Zarathustra and Marx" (Sinclair 1925, 294). It is worth noting that Nietzsche himself had possibly been influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom he had read and appreciated (Ratner-Rosenhagen 2012, 5). This arguable philosophical affinity might have facilitated the dissemination of the German philosopher's ideas among American readers.

Jack London is the novelist most associated with the notion of socialist superman (see Harpham 1975; Portelli 1982).[13] The American author "read Nietzsche in *c.* 1903 and was fascinated by his philosophy" (Bridgwater 1972, 163). London also read Wells, whom he discovered while reporting on the London East End slums in 1902 (Harpham 1975, 24). The title of the exposé deriving from his experience, *The People of the Abyss*, famously recuperates a notion popularized by Wells's own *Anticipations* (1901) (London 1907, 252). London's Nietzschean – and, in part, Wellsian – influence is most visible in *The Sea wolf* (1904), *The Iron Heel* (1907) and *Martin Eden* (1909). These novels "promoted a Darwinian vision of the Übermensch as one who clawed against outworn ideals of possessive individualism and helped

remake a strong socialist society" (Ratner-Rosenhagen 2012, 113). For instance, in *The Iron Heel*, the revolutionist Ernest Everhard – the name suggests the character's best features – is described as a "natural aristocrat – and this in spite of the fact that he was in the camp of the non-aristocrats. He was a superman, a blond beast such as Nietzsche* has described, and in addition he was aflame with democracy" (London 1907, 6). In the footnote, the frame narrator Anthony Meredith explains that Nietzsche was "the mad philosopher of the nineteenth century of the Christian Era, who caught wild glimpses of truth, but who, before he was done, reasoned himself around the great circle of human thought and off into madness" (*ibid.*).

2.3   From *The Overman* to "The Reign of the Super-Man"

Jack London is regarded as one of the major influences on the thought of Upton Sinclair (Zinn [1980] 2015, 322; Arthur 2006, 166). Socialism and political commitment were not the sole interests shared by the two writers, who exchanged a conspicuous correspondence.[14] Most remembered for his muckraking novels as *The Jungle* (1906), Sinclair also engaged with the utopian and superhuman discourses of the early twentieth century. In this regard, the lesser known novelette *The Overman* (1907) articulates in an original way the relationship between posthumanity and utopianism explored by Wells few years before. The novelette delves in fact into the notions of superhuman spirituality and ascetic isolation, prefiguring motifs that would also be central to the characterization of postmodern superheroes in the late twentieth century.

Sinclair met Wells during the latter's first trip to the US, in 1906 (see Chapter 1.7). As the former writes in his autobiography,

> For myself I had good company that summer [of 1908]; a man whom I had met two years before, at the time *The Jungle* was published. An Englishman twelve years older than I, he had come to New York and sent me a letter of introduction from Lady Warwick, our socialist countess. H. G. Wells was the traveler's name, and I had been obliged to tell him that I had never heard of him. He sent me his *Modern Utopia*, inscribing it charmingly, "To the most hopeful of Socialists, from the next most hopeful." I found it a peerless book, and wrote him a letter that he accepted as "a coronation." […] Since then I have heard the highbrow critics belittle H. G. Wells; but I know that with Bernard Shaw he constituted a major period in British letters. (Sinclair 1962, 145–46)

This passage indicates the esteem in which Sinclair held Wells, both as a novelist and an intellectual. In fact, "it seems clear that Sinclair regarded Wells as something of a mentor" (D. C. Smith 1986, 400), even though "what might have been an unusually productive friendship scarcely progressed beyond an acquaintance" (*ibid.*). Sinclair's most explicit acknowledgment of Wells's importance came in 1915, when he edited *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest*. Introduced by Jack London's preface, this lengthy volume collects "The Writings of Philosophers, Poets, Novelists, Social Reformers, and Others Who Have Voiced the Struggle Against Social Injustice – Selected from Twenty-Five Languages, Covering a Period of Five Thousand Years" (1915, frontispiece). The book can be seen as one the earliest recognition of Wells's international literary status, for the writer is juxtaposed to masters like Geoffrey Chaucer, Miguel Cervantes, and William Shakespeare. Sinclair selected excerpts from three works of Wells's, the semiautobiographical *Tono Bungay* (519–22), the non-fictional *New World for Olds* (675), and *WSW* (712–13).

It would be tempting to view Sinclair's *The Overman* as directly influenced by his own 1906 meeting with Wells. Even the title – neither Shaw's "Superman", nor Tille's "Beyond-man" – might indicate a Wellsian contamination. The novelette could also be seen as a direct continuation of the Nietzschean motifs of *The Jungle* (1906), "in which special tribute had been paid, within a socialist context, to 'Nietzsche, the prophet of evolution'" (Fernihough 2013, 138). However, it would appear that *The Overman* had been composed few years before, probably in 1902 (Sinclair 1962, 83; Welland 1979, 482). Whether it was revised or rewritten for the 1907 publication is not for us to know. What is certain is that "supermanhood" (Sinclair 1925, 363–72) and Nietzscheism had already stimulated Sinclair's literary creativity at the very beginning of the century, when he read *Also sprach Zarathustra* in the original German. Nietzsche influenced in a clear manner his 1903 books, the fictionalized autobiography *The Journal of Arthur Stirling*, which in Sinclair's own opinion "helped to launch the Nietzsche cult in America" (Sinclair 1962, 87; see also Ratner-Rosenhagen 2012, 157), and *Prince Hagen: a Phantasy*, which "demonstrates a sympathy with Wagnerian metaphysics" (Stoddard Martin 1983, 139). Depending on the actual year of composition, *The Overman* thus prefigures or further explores the philosophical preoccupations of the early Sinclair.

Utopianism also constitutes a significant, albeit less visible strand of Sinclair's literary production. Utopian contaminations can be traced in several works of political engagement, including the futurological essay *The Industrial Revolution* (1907). However, his sole text

specifically devoted to the conceptualization of an ideal society is *The Millennium: A Comedy of the Year 2000*, written as a play in 1907 and novelized in 1924. In conformity with the tradition of American utopianism, Sinclair's own utopian effort was more practical than literary. In October 1906, he used the money earned from *The Jungle* to establish an intentional community in Englewood, New Jersey (Arthur 2006, 88). The "Helicon Home Colony" did not admit black persons, employed the twenty-one-year old Sinclair Lewis as a janitor, and was accused by the press of being "a hotbed of sexual intrigue where 'free love' reigned" (95). It burned down in March 1907.[15]

Although Sinclair claims not to have read Wells until 1906, the beginning of *The Overman* is decidedly Wellsian. The story is told in the first person by Edward, a homodiegetic narrator briefly introduced by another anonymous frame narrator. Edward claims to be "a scientist" (Sinclair 1907, 3), who is "travelling as a naturalist in Ceylon" (5). He is told that his presumed-dead brother, a musician called Daniel, is actually alive and lives alone "upon an uninhabited island" (*ibid.*).[16] Edward thus sets out to look for his brother, but the crew of his yacht mutinies for no apparent reason. He escapes on a lifeboat, with which he somehow manages to reach Daniel's island. Even from this brief summary, the similarities with *IDM* are evident: both tales open with a frame narrative, feature a scientifically-educated homodiegetic narrator, describe a revolt on a boat and a fortuitous escape to a secluded island. Moreover, the rest of *The Overman* reads like a narrativization of Prendick's final words in *Moreau*, describing a state of isolation, and a cosmic connection with otherworldly forces (see Pagetti 1986, 28).[17]

The novelette also engages in the dialectic of deanthropization and posthumanity. When Edward's brother – the eponymous overman – first appears, he shows the signs of zoomorphic retrogression:

> A creature more changed no man could imagine. Gaunt, hollow-eyed, and wild in appearance, he was scarcely the shadow of his former self; he was clad in a rough garment of fur, bare-footed and barearmed, and with long, tangled hair. But what most struck me – what struck me the instant I opened my eyes, and what never ceased to strike me after that – was the strange, haunted look of his whole countenance; his eyes, swift and restless, shone from beneath the shadow of his brows like those of some forest animal. For the first few dazed minutes I thought of what I had read of men who had gone mad, or had reverted to the beast, under such circumstances as these. (*The Overman*, 11–12)

The attention to the eyes as signifiers of regression is another feature that seems to have been inspired by Wells's scientific romances (see Chapter 1.6). Considering the physical

appearance, Edward also hypotheses that Daniel might have become insane, like Prendick at the end of *IDM*.

Despite his beastly aspect, Daniel claims to be able to achieve a superior status of being, albeit with much strain, and for a limited amount of time. However, differently from Wells's romances, this state is not obtained through the means of science or technology.[18]After eight years of ascetic isolation and contemplation, he experienced a preternatural awakening:

> I sat in a state which there is no imagining – I ate nothing for days, I sat for days without moving, until at last there came the climax, a desperate resolve, a mounting up, a battling with unseen forces, a knocking upon unseen doors – and then a sudden rending away of barriers, and the inpouring of a sea of life. I can only use metaphors. I was a traveller, and I had toiled towards the sunrise, climbing peak upon peak, and suddenly I had stepped out upon the summit, and stood transfixed with the glory of an endless vision of dawn. (73–74)

The superhuman metamorphosis is described as an aesthetic experience. Daniel has reached a sort of self-sufficiency (65), in which he is no longer ontologically separated from the object of artistic creation: "I *live* music in my soul" (25, emphasis in the original). Anne Fernihough points out that Daniel's superhumanity resonates with "the most influential tenets of modernist aesthetics. Edward's account of Daniel's brief, hard-won spells of superhumanity reads in many ways like a modernist manifesto. […] During his spells as an overman, Daniel seems quite literally to mutate from human being into art-work, becoming the music that he used to compose, creating himself as he goes along" (2013, 139). Despite the "conventional, 'realist'" style (*ibid*.), *The Overman* hence dramatizes the process by which "modernism's introspective probing of the deeper impulses of consciousness, and even the unconscious itself, was always accompanied by a Utopian sense of the impending transformation or transfiguration of the 'self' in question" (Jameson 1991, 312).

In this regard, the novelette suggest that utopia actually constitutes the symbolic correlative to the superhuman 'transfiguration'. Daniel's ecstasy allows him to come into contact with "another earth" (75), inhabited by "Another race of beings" (75). These creatures presumably "were once men" (81), and are "throughout universal space they the race which is nearest in its development to our own" (78). Far from being tentacled monsters, these benign overmen live contemplating the beauty of life (85), but embrace the idea that "The essence of life is sorrow" (81), and each of them "bear in his bosom a pain for which there are no words".[19] Their place of dwelling and their relationship with it are described in utopian terms: "They have

attained to mastery over the world of matter. They temper the seasons to their wish; disease and ill-health they have banished entirely; and understanding the ways of Nature, they create their food at will" (86). These last points are somehow ambiguous, for it is not clear whether the mastery of nature has been achieved through scientific – and thus cognitive – means, or it has a metaphysical root. Whatever the case may be, the beings "have no government", and "their law is their inspiration" (*ibid.*). Their lack of formal administration is probably facilitated by their communicative skills, since "They have passed the need of language – they communicate with each other by immediate spiritual union" (77).

This otherworldly utopian dimension is juxtaposed to Daniel's island, which represents a 'partial' or 'incomplete' utopia. Even though the island displays the cognitive articulation of paradisiacal traits – the abundance of food, the reduced amount of physical work (48) –, it lacks the social dimension. It is, as Sargent puts it, a "eutopia of solitude" (1994, 13).[20] Daniel eventually refuses to come back to society, preferring his isolation and his occasional contacts with the creatures: "I do not wish to change. And I could not face the thing which you call civilisation" (*The Overman*, 88).

Rather than the explicitly mentioned *Robinson Crusoe* (25), Sinclair's model here appear to be Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), which "can almost be considered the epitome of American utopianism" (Kumar 1987, 82). Thoreau's account of solitary life in fact "carries to a logical extreme the utopian promise of America to grant every single individual the right and opportunity to pursue his own vision, however idiosyncratic, of the good life" (*ibid.*). Unlike *Walden*, however, Daniel's ontological self-sufficiency deprives him from the will, or the necessity, to disclose his own experience. The only way for the reader to experience his "Nietzschean awakening" (Stoddard Martin 1983, 139) is through an external visitor, who asks questions and reports the testimony. In this regard, *The Overman* replicates the dialogic structure of numerous utopian novels, in which the interaction between traveller and utopians "serves a cognitively estranging function" (Rogan 2009, 311).

Daniel's utopian isolation is ultimately the key to understanding *The Overman*'s vision of superhumanity. The novelette eschews the social complexities outlined in Wells's romances to suggest the individual segregation upon a remoted island. As urban modernity and society are rejected, the contrast between 'social man' and 'animal man' altogether avoided. The *übermensch* is a self-content entity only troubled by, in Daniel's words, "the enforced companionship of men who did not understand me" (*The Overman*, 62). As Coogan points out,

The superman who withdraws from society to pursue a solitary spiritual quest provides a way of diffusing the disruptive nature of the figure. By exiling himself into a monastic state, the hermit figure precludes the necessary conflict with society that the SF superman's superiority always brings. (2006, 134)

The dramatic conflict of superhumanity and society constitutes the thematic core of Philip Wylie's *Gladiator* (1930). Best known for its alleged influence on *Superman*'s creators, the novel serves as a symbolic bridge among the realms of scientific romance, 'scientifiction', and comic books. At the same time, it preludes certain developments of 1980s deconstructionist graphic novels, as the loneliness and fundamental inoperability of the superhero.

Gladiator translates the *Frankenstein* archetype into modern America. It narrates the eventful, tragic life of Hugo Danner, an extraordinarily strong and quasi-invulnerable individual born in Colorado at the end of the 1800s.[21] Hugo's remarkable features determine the fragmented, episodic narrative, and the whole novel concentrates on his invariably ruinous attempts at finding a place in a society unable to accept his physical superiority. He enrols at Webster University, where he plays college football and accidentally kills another player; he fights in the Great War, in which he kills many but is unable to play a decisive role; he works in a steel mill, from which he is fired for "working too hard" (Wylie [1930] 2015, 169). As the narrator points out, "His life had been comprised of attempt and failure, of disappointment and misunderstanding: he was accustomed to witness the blunting of the edge of his hopes and the dulling of his desires when they were enacted" (153–154). As a work of science fiction, a cognitive rationale is provided for Hugo's powers. While still in his mother's uterus, he is in fact injected with a serum of "Alkaline radicals" (3) by his father Abednego, a biologist who believes that "chemistry controls human destiny" (2).[22]

As argued in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, "*Gladiator* is as close to the Scientific Romance as an American writer of genre fiction was likely to reach" (Clute et al. 2015b). In this regard, the most immediate source appears to be Wells's *Food of the Gods* (1904, hereinafter *FG*), from which Wylie possibly borrowed "the notion of a growth producing serum" (Andrae 1980, 90).[23] As Clifford Bendau points out, rephrasing Sam Moskowitz, Wylie had been an "avid reader" of H.G. Wells in his childhood (1980, 5). Wylie's debt to the British writer is most explicit in his subsequent novel, *The Murderer Invisible* (1931), which draws clear inspiration from *IM* (Coogan 2006, 137–38; Bendau 1980, 12–13). Wylie also co-scripted *The Island of Lost Souls*, a 1932 film adaptation of Wells's *IDM* starring Charles Laughton and

Bela Lugosi (see K. Williams 2007, 165–66). It can be argued that Wylie chose Wells as a literary and intellectual model to distance himself from the pulp landscape.[24] According to Jones,

> Wylie's use of biological fantasy would later lead science fiction fans to claim *Gladiator* as a product of their beloved genre, but his models were not Gernsback's pulp stories. Wylie mocked junk culture, mocked yellow journalism and Bernarr MacFadden and narcissistic body-builders, and he'd surely have mocked *Amazing Stories* if he'd bothered to notice it. He lifted tricks from the satirical parades of Henry Fielding and William Thackeray, pulled themes from the intellectual allegories of H. G. Wells and Friedrich Nietzsche. (G. Jones 2004, 78)

Wylie's own literary ambitions may be seen as the reason why his novel was not serialized on magazines. He wrote *Titan*, an early version of *Gladiator*, in 1926 (G. Jones 2015, vii) or 1927 (Andrae 1980, 92), and submitted it to Alfred A. Knopf. The latter was publishing some genre fiction – notably by M.P. Shiel and Arthur Machen, and later also Wells –, but was most associated to highbrow authors like Ezra Pound, Thomas Mann or Franz Kafka. Knopf "declined to publish the book until Wylie thoroughly rewrote it" (Feeley 2005, 180). In the meantime, he released a couple of non-speculative novels of Wylie's, *Heavy Laden* (1928) and *Babes and Sucklings* (1929). *Gladiator* was finally released in 1930. The extent of the revision is unknown, since no copies of the original manuscript seem to have survived (G. Jones 2015, vii).

The adherence to *FG* is most visible in *Gladiator*'s initial chapters. Both novels begin with the scientists testing their newly-found substance on tadpoles – "One always does try this sort of thing upon tadpoles to begin with" (Herbert George Wells [1904] 1906, 16) –, later on larger animals (chickens in *FG* and a cat in *Gladiator*), and finally on human babies. Then, there follow scenes displaying the grotesque abnormality of the mutated babies. The latter are described as unnaturally strong, hungry, incompatible with normal infants' containers: young Redwood "broke down his high-class bassinet-perambulator" (*FG*, 123), while little Hugo Danner "smashed the crib" and was put in "a pen [made by] the iron heads and feet of two old beds" (*Gladiator* 18–19). Another feature shared by the two novels concern the possibility of generalized superhumanity. Since their early stages of their experiment, *FG*'s Mr. Bensington and *Gladiator*'s Abednego envisage the possibility to replicate it (*FG*, 67), and to turn the baby into "the first of a new and glorious race. A race that doesn't have to fear – because it cannot know harm" (*Gladiator*, 18).[25]

The main difference between the text lies in the concretization of this eventuality. In fact, *FG* and *Gladiator* can be said to respectively epitomize the possibilities of collective and monadic superhumanity, whose conflict is dramatized in *WSW*. Even though ultimately unable to coexist with the 'pygmies', *FG*'s giants are described as a viable posthuman alternative, "a new race in the world" (*FG*, 243). The solution to the conflict would entail the elimination of evolutionary difference. In other words, extending the giants' superiority to the whole humanity, for "it is for the little people to eat the Food" (*FG*, 311). In *Gladiator*, on the other hand, collective superhumanity is considered but never achieved. Hugo Danner is condemned to isolation and childlessness. In spite of his frequent sexual intercourses, he never produces an offspring, and suspects he might be "sterile" (*Gladiator*, 43). Hugo's college football coach, Mr. Woodman, suggests that the boy may ask his father to disclose the secret of the superhuman strength, since "the rest of humanity would profit [from it]" (102). Hugo refuses: "you can't conceive, Woodie, what it means to have it" (102–103). The possibility of turning Hugo's uniqueness into a collective characteristic is addressed again towards the end of the novel. First, when Abednego, on his deathbed, asks Hugo "Shall there be made more men like you – and women like you?" (202). The father then confesses that it would be his dream to see "A world grown suddenly – as you are" (*ibid.*). Secondly, when the archaeologist with which Hugo is working in Yucatan (another of his odd jobs) suggest that there should be

> Other men like you. Not one or two. Scores, hundreds. And women. All picked up with the utmost care. Eugenic offspring. Cultivated and reared in secret by a society for the purpose. Not necessarily your children, but the children of the best parents. Perfect bodies, intellectual minds, your strength. Don't you see it, Hugo? You are not the reformer of the old world. You are the beginning of the new. (230)

However, after an initial interest, Hugo dismisses the archaeologist's proposition. After his own troublesome experiences, he is aware that humanity "would hate his new race" (232). Moreover, he fears that "If his Titans disagreed and made war on each other – surely that would end the earth" (*ibid*.). According to Chris Gavaler, Hugo's monadic superhumanity can be seen as reflecting the diminishing popularity of eugenics in late 1920s America, after almost three decades of growing interest.[26]

> New superhuman protagonists face death, isolation, and celibacy, all forms of narrative sterilization to subvert the threat of a singular Superman expanding into a race. Reversing the evolutionary anxiety that created eugenics and its heroes, the Superman became Well's

[*sic*] Coming Beast, the species that could battle against humanity for survival. (Gavaler 2014, 194)

Thus, as Siegel's *Superman* would conventionalize, alienation and "sexual renunciation" (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 36) constitute the *sine-qua-non* condition of 1930s superheroism.

Wylie's novel also reconfigures in a culturally- and historically-specific way the strands of socialism and utopianism explored in Wells's romances, and in particular in *FG*. I agree with Smith's claim that the Herakleophorbia, the eponymous 'food of the gods', may be an allegory for socialism (1986, 71). The substance serves as a transformative force, which slowly reshapes the nation: "The country was in patches: great areas where the Food was still to come, and areas where it was already in the soil and in the air, sporadic and contagious. It was a bold new motif creeping in among ancient and venerable airs" (*FG*, 204). The giants appear to overcome class distinctions, as demonstrated by the romance between young Redwood and the unnamed Princes who has been administered the food.[27] Moreover, they question class inequalities:

> "Mother," he [young Caddles] would say, "if it's good to work, why doesn't every one work?" […] "What's work *for*, mother? Why do I cut chalk and you wash clothes, day after day, while Lady Wondershoot goes about in her carriage, mother, and travels off to those beautiful foreign countries you and I mustn't see, mother?"
> "She's a lady," said Mrs. Caddles.
> "Oh," said young Caddles, and meditated profoundly.
> "If there wasn't gentlefolks to make work for us to do," said Mrs. Caddles, "how should we poor people get a living?"
> This had to be digested.
> "Mother," he tried again; "if there wasn't any gentlefolks, wouldn't things belong to people like me and you, and if they did —" (*FG*, 194).

In the latter half of *FG*, it is suggested that the giants might represent a proper utopian alternative. They first set out to modernize the infrastructures of the nation, and to provide the 'pigmies' with better living conditions: "Let's go and build 'em a house close up to London, that will hold heaps and heaps of them and be ever so comfortable and nice, and let's make 'em a nice little road to where they all go and do business – nice straight little road, and make it all as nice as nice" (*FG*, 217). Then, when the conflict with humans intensifies, the 'Sons of the Food' consider escaping to a secluded area, to establish a community of their own: "There are great and desolate mountains amidst which we should seem no more than little people, there are remote and deserted valleys, there are hidden lakes and snow-girdled uplands untrodden by the feet of men. *There*—" (*FG*, 248). Eventually, when the prospect of a war with humanity

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appears to be inevitable, the giants articulate the spiritual significance of their own existence. As Johnson points out, "Wells seems to advocate childhood's spiritual regenerative potential and open up the possibility of a utopia" (Johnson 2014, 29). This point is made explicit in young Cossar's final monologue:

> We are here, Brothers, to what end? To serve the spirit and the purpose that has been breathed into our lives. We fight not for ourselves – for we are but the momentary hands and eyes of the Life of the World. So you, Father Redwood, taught us. Through us and through the little folk the Spirit looks and learns. From us by word and birth and act it must pass—to still greater lives. […] We fight not for ourselves but for growth – growth that goes on for ever. To-morrow, whether we live or die, growth will conquer through us. That is the law of the spirit for ever more. To grow according to the will of God! (*FG,* 316)

In *Gladiator*, this socio-political strand is largely absent. Hugo spends most of the novel pursuing prosaic professions, in the vain attempt to find "some universal foe to match against his strength" (*Gladiator*, 100). He claims that he would like to "cover the earth, making men glad and bringing a revolution into their lives" (99), but immediately after "he wonders for what reason there burned in him that wish to do great deeds. Humanity itself was too selfish and too ignorant to care" (*ibid*.). Even Hugo's participation in the Great War only serves to unleash his "desire […] to break and destroy and wreck" (103), and the narrator admits that he "dwelt on the politics of the war and its sociology only in the most perfunctory manner" (115).

The Wellsian association between superhumanity and utopianism briefly resurfaces in the twenty-first chapter, when Hugo moves to Washington and starts working as a disarmament lobbyist. His aspiration is "to right the wrongs of politics and government" (201). He reckons that the best use for his powers is not being "one impotent person seeking to dominate, but the agent of uplift" (206), for "he had seen a new way to reform the world" (*ibid*.). However, he soon realises that lobbyism and politics are not viable instruments of social betterment: "it was not individuals against whom the struggle was made, but mass stupidity, gigantic bulwarks of human incertitude. […] Hugo could not exorcise the world" (211). He then starts meeting with some "radicals", and offers to help them liberate two Russian immigrants who have been "summarily tried and convicted of murder" for the death of a federal officer (211).[28] It is worth noting that Hugo's political turn is not determined by newly-found ideological awareness. When his radical friend Skorvsky asks him whether he is an "independent communist", he replies to be merely a "friend of progress" (213). The reason for his interest in the radical cause

is mostly personal. As a social pariah, he in fact empathizes with the way in which radicals are marginalized and discriminated against:

> I know poignantly the glances that are given them, the stupidity of the police and the courts, the horror-stricken attitude of those who condemn them without knowledge of the truth or a desire for such knowledge. […] I know all that passionately and intensely. I know the blind fury to which it all gives birth. I hate it. I detest it. Selfishness, stupidity, malice. I know the fear it engenders – a dreadful and justified fear. I've felt it. (214)

This last sequence is set in the late 1910s, during the first "Red Scare" in American history (see Zangari 2012a, 524–26). Wylie briefly describes it as a period of social unrest, characterised by "strikes" (*Gladiator*, 212) and xenophobic hysteria. The post-war anxiety towards the 'reds' is not the only historical phenomenon represented in *Gladiator*. The hungry 'vet' queuing outside an employment agency – "'They was goin' to fix up everybody slick after he war. Oh, hell, yes'" (165) – alludes to the "anger of the veteran of the First World War, now without work, his family hungry" (Zinn [1980] 2015, 391). The veteran figure also can be said to symbolize the economic consequence of defence conversion, which would determine the recession of 1918-19 (O'Brien 1997, 151). Hugo also meets a banker who has managed to accumulate fortunes thanks to the conflict:

> "The world was mad. So I took my profit from it, beginning on the day I saw.
> "How, exactly?"
> […] "What was in demand, then, my boy? What were the stupid, traduced, misguided people raising billions to get? What? Why, shells, guns, foodstuffs. For six months I had a corner on four chemicals vitally necessary to the government. And the government got them – at my price. I owned a lot of steel. I mixed food and diplomacy in equal parts – and when the pie was opened, it was full of solid gold" (161)

The banker reminds the reader that, on a macroscopic level, American economy "benefited […] spectacularly" from the Great War (Hobsbawm 1994, 97). Combined together, the veteran and the banker epitomize the inequalities of post-war American economy. In particular, they prelude to the fact that in following decade "prosperity [would be] concentrated at the top", and that the shared wealth of the 'Roaring Twenties' would only be a myth (Zinn [1980] 2015, 382; see also Hobsbawm 1994, 100).

The representation of the Great War and its aftermath suggests the relationship between Hugo's fictional exploits and the historical background. As Jones points out, one of *Gladiator*'s

determining features is the way in which the superman is "set so vividly against a familiar and constraining reality" (G. Jones 2004, 81). The "Two-World structure" (Huntington 1981) of Wells's romances gives way to the *hic-et-nunc* of American urban modernity. The hypertechnological (*WSW*) or bucolic (*Men Like Gods*) utopian non-place is substituted by "the Flatiron Building, the clock on the Metropolitan Tower, and the creeping barrage of traffic that sent people scampering, stopped, moved forward again (163). But it is also replaced by the horrors of trench warfare: "He saw the man's clothes part smoothly from his bowels, where the point had been inserted, up to the gray-green collar. The seam reddened, gushed blood, and a length of intestine slipped out of it. The man's eyes looked at Hugo. He shook his head twice. The look became far-away. He fell forward" (126).

Gladiator's semi-alternate-history (1890s – early 1920s) resonates with the historical present in which the novel was composed and published (late 1920s).[29] Andrae suggests that the novel depicts a discontinuity in American history, i.e. the "collapse of the Horatio Alger ethos of laissez-faire individualism" (1980, 90). This process arguably started at the end of the nineteenth century, with the progressive "erosion of America's dreams of upward mobility, classlessness, and personal autonomy" (*ibid.*), and would culminate in New Deal's corporatism. As the scholar points out, "Hugo's desire for the traditional American values – independence, individual achievement, and social status are thwarted despite his heroic application of the work ethic, his youthful idealism, and his tremendous ability" (91). This dynamic is evident in the urban segments of the novel. When he goes to New York after the end of the war, Hugo is seduced by the allure of the metropolis:

> He realized even before he was accustomed to the novelty of civilian clothes that a familiar, friendly city had changed. The retrospective spell of the eighties and nineties had vanished. New York was brand-new, blatant, rushing, prosperous. The inheritance from Europe had been assimilated; a social reality, entirely foreign and American, had been wrought and New York was ready to spread it across the parent world. Those things were pressed quickly into Hugo's mind by his hotel, the magazines, a chance novel of the precise date, the cinema, and the more general, more indefinite human pulses. (*Gladiator*, 159)

However, Hugo's subaltern position precludes him the excitement of modern life. He is unable to find a stable employment, as his superiority renders him incompatible with 'normal' workers: "I had to lay off three – why? Because they couldn't keep up with you, that's way. Because they got their guts in a snarl trying to bust your record" (169). The *übermensch* thus joins the *lumpenproletariat*: he soon starts feeling "the pangs of hunger", while "His clothes

became shabby, he began to carry his razor in his overcoat pocket and to sleep in hotels that demanded only twenty-five cents for a night's lodging" (170). When he uses his strength to save the life a clerk imprisoned in a bank vault, he is arrested and brutally tortured, for "Society cannot afford to permit a man like you to go at large until it has thoroughly effective defence against you. Society must disregard your momentary sacrifice, your momentary nobleness. Your process, unknown by us, constitutes a great social danger" (176). Not only does this whole sequence point to the crisis of individualism, but it also presents the superman as a metaphor for the contradictions of modernity. Hugo Danner is the affirmation and simultaneous negation of endless possibilities. He epitomizes the fundamental inoperability and self-destructivity of the *novum*, the realization that with great power come alienation, suffering, and annihilation. His tragic parable dramatizes the idea that "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (Berman [1982] 1988, 15). Few years later, this ontological ambiguity would be picked up by superhero comics, which would reconfigure it to explore the fragmented experience of urban modernity.

In this regard*, Gladiator*'s most problematic aspect concerns its alleged direct influence on the creation of *Superman*.[30] The debate has a long history. As Gregory Feeley (2005) and Pádraig Ó Méalóid (2009) point out, the association between the two texts was first suggested in Sam Moskowitz's *Explorers of the Infinite* (1963). Moskowitz claims that "Cleveland cartoonist Joe Schuster [*sic*] and his author associate Jerome Siegel would borrow the central theme from *Gladiator*, even paraphrase some of the dialogue, to create one of the most popular cartoon adventure strips of our time and no one would dream the idea had once been the basis of a serious novel" (quoted in Ó Méalóid 2009). Throughout the decades, Wylie's novel has hence been codified as "one of the inspiration for Superman" (Coogan 2006, 8), and even the cover of the 2015 Dover reprint defines it as "The Enduring Classic That Inspired the Creators of Superman". To substantiate the influence hypothesis, different sources indicate that Siegel reviewed *Gladiator* in 1932 in the second issue of his own fanzine (see for instance G. Jones 2004, 81–82; Gavaler 2015, 218). However, no evidence for the existence of this script can be found, and it would appear that Siegel "never reviewed, or even mentioned *Gladiator* in the fanzine he published in high school" (G. Jones 2015, iv). Another persistent rumour holds that Wylie threatened to sue for plagiarism *Superman*'s authors and/or publisher soon after the

publication of the first *Superman* comic book (for example G. Jones 2004, 346; Gavaler 2015, 218; Ó Méalóid 2009 mentions other sources). Reportedly, Siegel even "did sign an affidavit claiming that Gladiator was not an inspiration for Superman" (Davis 2008). Once again, no written record of Wylie's 'threat' or Siegel's 'affidavit' is known to exist. Nonetheless, this myth seems to have some factual foundation. As Truman Frederick Keefer points out, "Wylie strongly believed that Superman was largely based on *Gladiator*" (quoted in Feeley 2005, 179). This assertion is corroborated by a letter Wylie wrote to J. Randolph Cox in 1970, in which he also mentions that he had actually considered suing *Superman*'s creators. According to Wylie, Siegel and Shuster

> used dialogue and scenes from GLADIATOR. […] I even consulted my lawyer to see if I ought not to sue for plagerism [*sic*]. He agreed I'd possibly win but found the 'creators' of 'Superman' were two young kids getting $25 a week apiece, only, and that a corporation owned the strip so recovery of the damages would be costly, long, difficult and maybe fail owing to that legal set-up." (Wylie quoted in Tye 2012, 33)

Besides what Wylie might have believed at some point in his life, the question whether Siegel and Shuster were or were not directly influenced is still open. As of this writing, there is no published interview or piece of writing in which the authors mention *Gladiator* (see Feeley 2005, 179).[31] Nonetheless, I agree with Ó Méalóid's claim that "there would seem to simply be too many similarities between the two works for [Siegel] not to have [read *Gladiator*]" (2009).[32] In particular, the novel and the early *Superman* tales rely upon analogous imagery. For instance, at the beginning of *Gladiator*, Abednego provides an entomological explanation for the way in which a human being could achieve super-strength,

> "Look at the insects – the ants. Strength a hundred times our own. An ant can carry a large spider – yet an ant is tissue and fiver, like a man. If a man could be given the same sinews – he could walk off with his own house. […] Consider the grasshoppers. Make a man as strong as a grasshopper – and he'll be able to leap over a church" (*Gladiator*, 2–3).

The same similes are employed in the first page of *Action Comics* #1 (1938), Superman's first apparition. A didactic caption points out that "even today on our world exist creatures with super-strength! The lowly ant can support weight hundreds of times its own. The grasshopper leaps what to man would be the space of several city blocks" (*AC*#1, 8).[33] Afterward, Hugo and Superman demonstrate their skills in similar manners: the former claims to be "faster'n a train"

(*Gladiator*, 33), while the latter "runs faster than a speeding train" *AC*#1, 8). The former tears open the steel door of a bank vault (174–175), the latter knocks down a safe room's steel door (*AC*#1, 10). Hugo "cannot be wounded except by the largest shell" (130), while "nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate [Superman's] skin" (8). Moreover, the very basis of entire *Superman* stories can be said to be inspired by chapters of *Gladiator*. In the first and second issue of *AC*, Clark Kent goes to Washington to fight a corrupt politician and a weapon lobbyist, as happens in the 21st chapter of Wylie's novel. Still in the second issue, Superman enlists in the military to end a war in a fictional South American Republic, not differently from Hugo's participation in WW1. In *AC*#4, he disguises as a player and dominates a college football game, like Hugo does in chapter nine – minus the accidental killing of another player (see G. Jones 2004, 142).

All these similarities suggest that *Gladiator* is likely to have constituted a source of inspiration for the first comic book superhero. Whatever the case may be, the novel's cultural significance lies in the way in which it appropriates the motifs of Wells's scientific romance, and repurposes them to explore the inherent complexities of American modernity. At the same time, it demonstrates "the essential emptiness of the dream of the superman" (Coogan 2006, 137). Whereas pulp literature and comics were increasingly embracing positive models of all-American heroism, Wylie anticipated the superhuman anxiety and alienation that would characterise the postmodern graphic novels of the 1980s. To a certain extent, "it's a kind of deconstructing of the genre before the genre had been really created" (Surridge 2013).

Gladiator's influence is less visible in Siegel's earliest prototype for *Superman*, i.e. "The Reign of the Super-Man" ([1933] 1983, hereinafter RS). The short story, illustrated by Shuster, was published in the third issue of Siegel and Shuster's mimeographed fanzine *Science Fiction: The Advance Guard of Future Civilization*.[34] Rather than displaying the feats of a physical *übermensch*, the tale of the villainous Bill Dunn engages with the classic Wellsian theme of "liberated intellect as a destructive element" (West [1957] 1976, 14). The eponymous, bald-headed Superman is in fact a scientifically-enhanced telepath, who uses his mental powers to gain wealth and wreak havoc.

The short story opens with a typical Depression-era image, the "bread-line! Its row of downcast, disillusioned men; unlucky creatures who have found that life holds nothing but bitterness for them. The bread-line! Last resort of the starving vagrant" (RS, 20). The undistinguished urban underclass is contrasted with the well-born professor Smalley, who "had

never been forced to face the rigors of life", and to whom "the miserableness of the men seemed deserved" (*ibid.*). His class and education endow him with a privileged position, from which to scrutinize the breadline, looking for a specimen among the "raggedly-dressed" (*ibid.*). He has in fact discovered a new chemical element in a "fragment of a meteor" (22), and after having observed "a strange influence upon the laboratory animals" he is ready for human experimentation. On the background, Shuster's illustration depicts a menacing figure, the evil Superman, looming over the "the futuristic city of skyscrapers, drawn in a clear-line style based on the cylinders and circles of industrial design" (G. Jones 2004, 82).

As soon as Bill Dunn – a "gentleman of the road" (RS, 22) – is administered Smiley's extraterrestrial chemical concoction, he turns into a psychical "Superman".[35] The transformation triggers the enhancement of his sensory perceptions. He is able to "intercept interplanetary messages, read the mind of anyone I desire, by sheer mental concentration force ideas into people's head, and throw my vision to any spot in the universe" (24). In addition, he claims omniscience: "during the night my mind has assimilated all the knowledge that exists in the universe. I know as much about Pluto as its inhabitants whose information I absorbed" (*ibid.*). It can be said that Dunn's powers serve as a symbolical counterpoint to the generalized confusion, precariousness, and atomization of the early 1930s. His ability to 'understand' and 'know' contrasts the idea that people are at the mercy of forces they do not fully grasp, but which are capable of destroying their life. As Andrae points out, "The bitterness and frustration caused by the Depression and the desire to gain power and mastery over a chaotic economic situation provide the focus for the superman's character" (1980, 94).

The description of Dunn's powers also reveals in an explicit manner the Wellsian contamination. The Superman is in fact able to project his vision to Mars, and to gaze at the alien creatures of the distant planet:

> Below him and stretching out from both sides of him to infinite distances was a straight unmarred plain. Except for two objects, and the pale sky, nothing else was in sight. The two objects instantly attracted his interest and attention. Both were – beings! One was a giant tree-like creature, the other a thirty-foot high thin streak of red light.
> […] Both seemed to flow, rather than to walk across the soil. The moment they came within striking distance, the tree-creature flung out a limb-like tentacle that agily [sic] wrapped itself about the red-intelligence. Other limbs flashed out, encircled the red flame and drew it against the tree's breast. In that instant the two alien monstrosities shook with their mighty efforts to destroy each other.
> And Dunn, while still on Earth, was witnessing this incredible scene, this sight which was transpiring 35,000,000 miles from where he lay motionless in the park.

This whole passage bears a strong resemblance with Wells's 1897 short story "The Crystal Egg", which Siegel might have read in the second issue of *Amazing Stories* (1926). In Wells's story, Mr. Case uses the eponymous device as a window onto Mars, on which he similarly sees a tentacled creature: "The body was small, but fitted with two bunches of prehensile organs, like long tentacles, immediately under the mouth" ([1897] 1900, 22). Analogous monsters appear in the following *WWs*, in which it is stated that the Earth and Mars are separated by "35,000,000" miles (Herbert George Wells [1898] 2005, 8) – the same distance indicated by Siegel.

IM represents another significant Wellsian influence. Dunn seems in fact partially modelled upon Griffin, who likewise plans to use his might to establish a 'Reign of Terror' (Coogan 2006, 139). RS also draws from Wells's romance the foremost application of the scientifically-engineered superpowers, i.e. the acquisition of money. Like Griffin, who mainly uses "his invisibility is to rob people of their cash" (Cantor 1999, 91), the Superman initial desire is "to collect a large sum of money" (RS, 24). He first induces a bystander to hand him ten dollars, and then moves to more remunerative uses of his newly-found clairvoyance, i.e. gambling and "another, but more popular gamble, the stock market".[36] Afterward, the vicious Superman sets out to enforce his dystopian vision by manipulating the world leaders into "[sending] the armies of the world to total annihilation against each other" (28). A journalist who is investigating on the Superman case – Forrest Ackerman, a nod to the well-known sci-fi expert[37] – voices the reader's bafflement about Dunn's intentions: "What might the Superman's motives be? Was it simply that his nature demanded he bring evilness and death upon humanity, or more likely, did he hope to gain control of it by first breaking down its strength by pitting it against itself?" (27).

Griffin's and Dunn's misuse of extraordinary powers for selfish purposes entails a critique of individualism. However, such criticism is embedded in different frameworks. While *IM* scrutinizes the relationship between science and society, and between divergent evolutionary possibilities (see Chapter 1.5), RS foregrounds the issue of social mobility. In this regard, Siegel's short story reveals a twofold ideological connotation. On the one hand, it confirms the attractiveness of upward mobility as a quintessential American dream, but denies the possibility of achieving that dream within the boundaries of law (Andrae 1980, 94). On the other hand, RS suggests that the disadvantaged, if/once empowered, are prone to adopting the

same pernicious behaviour that has caused their condition. Andrae sees this attribution of responsibility as a characteristic of much Depression-era science fiction:

> the superman stories were not concerned with the irresponsibility of entrepreneurs; rather, they dealt with the excessive individualism and self-seeking behavior of the masses. It is the resentful and down-trodden individuals on the dole who become maniacal, power-mad tyrants: the lowly electrician who hates his boss with the college education and high- paying job in Taine's "Seeds of Life," the starving, tubercular girl in Weinbaum's "Adaptive Ultimate," or the dour young man on the breadline in Siegel's "Reign of the Superman." The destructive individualism of the entrepreneur is thus projected onto the masses whose potentially revolutionary impulses are stigmatized as deriving from the same causes as the nation's economic ills. (1980, 96)

At the end of the short story, the effect of the drug wears off, and Dunn is forced "back in the bread-line" (RS, 28). As soon as he is disempowered, he realises that he could have used his powers in a constructive manner: "If I had worked for the good of humanity, my name would have gone down in history with a blessing – instead of a curse" (*ibid.*). This final moral teaching anticipates the authors' subsequent reconfiguration of the Superman figure into an agent for good.

Siegel's 1933 prose prototype does not seem to share many features with the 1938 comic book character. Bill Dunn and Professor Smalley can rather be said to have been conflated into Superman's first supervillain, the Ultra-Humanite, a disabled, almost bald (in some stories entirely bald) mad scientist who aims at the "domination of the earth" (*AC*#14, 221) (Gavaler 2016, 76). Another famous character possibly inspired by RS is Superman's nemesis Lex Luthor, a bald-headed inventor and business magnate (Tye 2012, 46–47). In his earliest apparition (*AC*#23, 1940), he uses hypnotism to promote a war between Galonia and Toran, two fictional European nations. In addition to the villains, at least two other elements of the Superman mythos are anticipated in Siegel's short story. First, the role of an extra-terrestrial rock, as Smalley's 'meteor' preludes to the devastating effects of Kryptonite. Second, the opposition between Dunn and the journalist would be remoulded as the Superman/Clark Kent dualism (see Daniels 1998, 14–15).

When asked to comment upon the shift from negative to positive Superman, Siegel claimed, "A couple of months after I published this story, it occurred to me that a Superman as a hero rather than a villain might make a great comic strip character in the vein of Tarzan, only more super and sensational than that great character" (interviewed in Andrae, Blum, and Coddington 1983, 9). The reasons were both editorial and didactic. The character had to set a

moral example, and fit within the open-ended serial structure that had been characterizing comic strips since the 1910s (see Gardner 2012, 40–49):

> Obviously, having him a hero would be infinitely more commercial than having him a villain. I understand that the comic strip *Dr. Fu Manchu* ran into all sorts of difficulties because the main character was a villain. And with the example before us of Tarzan and other action heroes of fiction who were very successful, mainly because people admired them and looked up to them, it seemed the sensible thing to do to make *The Superman* a hero. The first piece was a short story and that's one thing; but creating a successful comic strip with a character you'll hope will continue for many years, it would definitely be going in the wrong direction to make him a villain. (Siegel in Andrae, Blum, and Coddington 1983, 10)

Siegel here adumbrates a central node of superhero narrative, i.e. the incompatibility between ongoing serialization and the structural features of the archetype. It may be added that the problem does not arise from the character's 'goodness' or 'villainy', as Siegel implies. In fact, the conflict with the narrative open-endedness stems from the inherent eutopian-dystopian tendency, deriving from the archetype's cultural and literary influences. The comic-book superman is torn between the lack of narrative closure on the one hand, and the transformational potentiality on the other. Changing the world, but keeping it the same for the following issue. It is precisely in this space of continuous negotiation that the pop superman has been served as a metaphor of modernity, technological development, and (later) the status of America in the contemporary world.

The Overman, *Gladiator* and RS show three different but interrelated modalities in which the Wellsian dialectic of superhumanity and utopianism has been translated into various strata of early twentieth-century American literature. These texts confirm the cultural significance and pervasiveness of Wells's early fiction, and in return gain cultural prestige from the founding father of sci-fi. At the same time, they epitomize the vast repertoire of heterogeneous sources that have informed the birth of the comic book as an autonomous narrative form and aesthetic mode. From Sinclair's philosophical sophistication to Siegel's sci-fi fanzine, the popularization of the scientific romance and of the superman idea thus paves the way for the late 1930s superhero explosion. After being a hermit, an alienated loner, and a tyrant, with *AC*#1 the comic book superhuman recuperates the previous prosocial and eutopian dimension. The scrutiny of American modernity, capitalism and technological supremacy continues under the guise of a costumed alien, wearing a red cape, and with an S-shaped emblem on his chest. An alien that would come to embody 'Truth, Justice and the American Way'.

2.4 Comics, Modernism and Avant-Garde

The influence of the scientific romance on the birth of American superhero comics contributes to determine an ambivalent relationship with modernity. This ambiguity has a twofold articulation. On the one hand, it invests the process and products of modernization. Early superhero comics recuperate the dualism of Wells's early romances, in which technological development is both seen as an instrument of discovery and advancement – the 'time machine' –, but also as a carrier of death and domination – the Martians' tripods (Pagetti 1986, 19). On the other hand, the ambivalence informs the genre's approach to utopianism.[38] The superhero archetype epitomizes the potentiality of social betterment, but the mechanism of open-ended serialization impedes the achievement of proper eutopia. The ideal society is thus simultaneously desired and disavowed. The narrative fetishization of utopia can be seen as a specific articulation of the tension between "The structure of myth and the 'civilization' of the novel", described by Umberto Eco as a structural feature of superhero comics (Eco 1972, 15). It is worth noting an analogous ambiguity about modernization and utopianism specifically characterizes the narrative framework of Wells's *WSW* (Huntington 1982, 125), which has been identified as a precursor to the whole superhero genre (see Chapter 1.7).

The dialectical interaction of those dynamics is particularly evident in the early issues of *Superman* (June 1938) and *Batman* (May 1939), which initiated the Golden Age of comics, and popularized the comic book form (Bongco 2000, 95–96; Restaino 2004, 135).[39] The former character inaugurated the genre as "an offshoot of science-fiction" (Alan Moore in Khoury 2001, 24), and established the formulas, like the secret identity, or the costume.[40] The latter – "both part of the Superman tradition, and a contrast to it" (Sabin 1993, 146) – suggested the possibilities of generic contamination, incorporating Gothic fiction and German expressionism in the "trashy aesthetic of the mystery pulps and the penny dreadfuls" (Morrison 2012, 22). It can be thus argued that "Superman and Batman provide the two primary paradigms of superherodom" (Coogan 2006, 200). Every single comic book superhero created after these two characters is virtually a variation on their basic formulas. However, before analysing the ambiguous representation of modernity in Superman and Batman (or Bat-Man, as it was originally spelled), it is necessary to consider the formal and cultural specificity of comics as modern medium. In particular, the relation of sequential art with modernism and historical avant-gardes.

The connection of comics with cultural and aesthetic modernism lies in the medium's unique capacity of producing a vision of urban modernity. Since the early experiments of Richard F. Outcault (*The Yellow Kid,* 1895) and Winsor McCay (*Little Nemo in Slumberland,* 1905), comics has constituted a deliberate effort to "evolve new forms for expressing a new urban experience" (Brooker 1996, 20), a popular "attempt to grasp and shape the altered conditions of modernity" (47). As "the first and arguably most important of the new vernacular modernisms", graphic narrative has been "dedicated to diagramming the serial complexities of modern life and fixing the fragments of modernity on the page" (Gardner 2012, 7). Thanks to its basic signifying practices – the use of panels, the arrangement in strips –, the comics medium is thus able to convey the fragmented experience of modernity, characterized by continuous shocks and juxtaposed stimuli. Even more than film, which developed in the same years, comics elevates the modernist tool of montage to fundamental technical device. Comics *is* montage. Combining the dialectical tension between "restricted" and "general arthrology" (Groensteen [1997] 2007, 22) with a specific graphiation,[41] the medium produces a non-linear and non-mimetic discourse which exposes and reflects upon "the very processes of signification" (Barker 2003, 194). Like a proper modernist work, the comic page "proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact" (Bürger [1974] 1984, 72). It "calls attention to the fact that it is made up of reality fragments; it breaks through the appearance (*Schein*) of totality" (*ibid.*).

As a composite medium and a product of modern mass culture,[42] comics is also to be analysed with reference to the mass-mediated perception of the urban space. Discussing the link between comics and urbanity, Ahrens and Meteling argue that

> One important aspect of this relationship is the meaning of space in regard to political sovereignty and a "structuring gaze." This structuring gaze of comics implements a topographical reading of the cityscape, which is led by the point of view in frames, panels and sequences. The urban landscape is similarly structured by panel-like blocks and grids. For the purpose of individual adaptation the modern city demands certain capacities to direct and organize the gaze as modernity's central sense of perception. (Ahrens and Meteling 2010b, 7)

Reading a comic book page is akin to perceiving the semiotically overloaded urban space. In both sites, the fundamental tension between verticality and horizontality is expressed through spatial textualization and geometrical structuration.[43] As a flâneur, the gaze of the comics reader wanders through a permeable space, which allows for subversive detours and scopophilic engagements (see Frahm 2010, 42–44). Jens Balzer identifies Benjamin's *Zerestreuung*

(distraction) as the key notion to approach the relationship between the urban exploration and the visual-verbal semiosis of comics, marked by the "intermingling of words and images" (Balzer 2010, 27). In "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", Benjamin in fact describes the 'distracted' perception as popular and antithetical surrogate to the sophisticated contemplation of the work of art: "The masses are criticized for seeking distraction [*Zerstreuung*] in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration" (2008, 39).[44] According to the German critic, this anticontemplative stance "*is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception*" (41, emphasis in the original). Distraction is the perception of the city stroller, the flâneur, who "must simultaneously process different views and stimulation to the senses – listening and seeing, watching and reading – and he must also move past or through the objects of his perception in order to be able to see them as a whole" (Balzer 2010, 26). Comics rely upon the very same perceptive modality. The medium implicates a decentralized reading that eschews any pretence of simultaneity. Distraction is thus needed to decode the in-panel mingling of word images, the juxtaposition of sequential images,[45] and the translinear organization of the page (see Groensteen [1997] 2007, 145–49).

Sequential art hence emerged as an innovative medium apt to chart the altered conditions of modernity. However, to define comics as a "vernacular modernism", "mass market modernism" (Gordon 1995), or "popular modernism" (Worden 2015, 60) appears to be problematic, due to the adversary relationship between aesthetic modernism and mass culture. As Andreas Huyssein points out, "Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture" (1986, vii). From a political and formal standpoint, I therefore suggest comparing comics to the historical avant-gardes, which in the early twentieth century "aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture and thus should be distinguished from modernism" (viii).[46] In his seminal examination of the historical avant-gardes, Peter Bürger analyses the way in which those movements attempted at sealing the fracture between art and society. He writes that

> with the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism. Dadaism, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde, no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society. [...] The avant-garde turns against both-

the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy. (Bürger [1974] 1984, 22)

The intention was thus "the destruction of art as an institution set off from the praxis of life" (83). In spite of their ultimate failure, the avant-gardes managed to conceptualize an alternate aesthetic and epistemological framework, opening up to political, technological, and/or popular contaminations.

It is in the "hidden dialectic of avantgarde and mass culture" (Huyssen 1986, 9) that comics expresses its ontological hybridity. The medium can be seen as a symmetric counterpart to the historical avant-gardes, operating and innovating within the realm of mass culture. While overt engagement was rarely to be found – and this is not the case for the early Superman –, this cultural dynamic had and still has profound socio-political consequences. Comics open up the non-figurative experiments of avant-garde to new, popular audiences for creative consumption and appropriation. Despite all the artistic and literary limitations often arising from assembly-line production models, the medium carries out the "sublation of art that the avant-gardistes intended, its return to the praxis of life" (Bürger [1974] 1984, 58) from the pages of newspapers and cheap comic books. Whereas Dada was art claiming to be 'non-art' or 'anti-art' (Elger 2016, 275), comics were already the very opposite of art.[47]

The connection between comics and the historical avant-gardes can be assessed from an aesthetic and formal standpoint. The assumption is not new. In 1949, Politzer had already claimed that "Living parasitically on the body of contemporary civilization, the comic strip has sucked in as much of the art of the century as it could digest. It contains traces of impressionism and even of abstract art. […] These strips also demonstrate the possibilities of modern non-objective art for popular consumption" (Politzer [1949] 1963, 49). Translated into a less apocalyptic tone, Politzer's claim hints at comics' capability to popularize the aesthetic innovation of proper art in an object of mass consumption. Albeit historically true, this conception may however lead to an implicit accusation of domesticating – or trivializing – the formal sublimity of art, and re-producing the pretence of cultural uplift. In this view comics become, recuperating Clement Greenberg's influential definition of kitsch, the "debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture" (1939). I would argue that sequential art's formal specificity and capacity for autonomous innovation are instead to be considered. Comics should not merely be reduced to a popularizer of sophisticated artistic and/or narrative form. Even though it may be said that the medium "scouted the frontiers of modernity and helped to educate

audiences into new storytelling practices for the new century" (Gardner 2012, 2), that has never been the primary creative concern. Comics is not inherently didactic. It engages in a dialectical negotiation between mass and high culture, transfiguring the formal hybridity of its signifying system into a cultural inbetweenness. Thus, rather than speaking of unidirectional influences, it would be more productive to consider the way in which comics and avant-garde elaborated comparable representational strategies within their own institutional and creative framework.

This process is visible, for instance, in the creative aestheticization of the typographical sign, an aspect related to the grammatextuality of comics.[48] According to Baetens and Frey,

> The form of the lettering, the configuration of the words in the speech balloons and the insertions of these balloons in the panels, the presence of letters and other written symbols within the fictional world, the presence of the typical onomatopoeias ("wham," "whoosh," "whap"), the visual dialogue between words and images on the page – all these elements underscore the importance of the visual form of the words in the graphic novel. (2015, 153)

Analogous approaches to creative typography were championed by Futurism and Dada. As Scott McCloud suggests, taking as an example the Dada poster for the play 'The Bearded Heart' and Francis Picabia's "Portrait de Tristan Tzara" (1920), Dadaism, Futurism and the comics medium converged in the erosion of the "frontier between appearance and meaning" (McCloud 1994, 148). This barrier historically separated the forms of pictorial representation from the text material, creating the divide between 'visual art' and 'literature'.

The visual-verbal hybridity is part of a conscious effort towards a non-mimetic construction of reality characterizing comics and the avant-gardes. In this regard, Cubism and sequential art can be said to engage with what Suvin calls "the new *epistemé* […] of spatiotemporal covariance [and] simulsequentialism that developed at the beginning of the twentieth century" (1979, 74). Both comics and Cubism "ignore the rules of perceptible space, naturalistic colouration and the rendition of bodies in natural proportions. The three-dimensionality of [the bodies], and the space they move in, fragment into a two-dimensional type of ornamentation and unite different perspectives simultaneously" (Ganteführer-Trier 2016, 113). This latter point is arguably the most significant. Cubist paintings "strove to dissolve conventional notions of time, space, and the single, static image by showing an object observed and perceived from a multitude of viewpoints at different points in time" (Bernard and Carter 2005, 6). As a discrete signifying unit, the comics page is likewise composed of a plurality of lower-tier images – the panels –, which (can) show different perspectives, and

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whose sequential juxtaposition creates the illusion of time and movement. A sequence of panels is thus able to display multiple spatial and temporal aspects of the same object/event. What cubism concentrates within a multisided simultaneity, comics unfold in the composite space of the multiframe.[49]

A similar interest in simultaneity characterizes Italian Futurism, which also explored the aesthetic possibilities of constant dynamism. As Bernard and Carter suggest, "Cubism's occupation with multiple perspectives led to futurism and its examination of movement, growth, and time" (2005, 8). This had significant implications in Futurist sculpture and painting. In the latter, "subject matter now began to be dissolved by breaking open its forms and repeating certain elements. […] 'Lines of force', the Futurist term for dynamic vectors of paint, animated the composition as much as the pure, brilliant colour values used, whose 'virginity' and 'rawness' corresponded to the Futurists' revolutionary model" (Sylvia Martin 2016, 206). McCloud points out that, in the same years, sequential art similarly sought to replicate the dynamism of motion on the bidimensional surface of the page: "As the moving picture began its spectacular rise, a few of the more radical painters of the day explored the idea that motion could be depicted by a single image on canvas. The Futurists in Italy and Marcel Duchamp in France began the systematic decomposition of moving images in a static medium. […] Throughout this same period [comics], less conspicuously, had been investigating this same area" (1994, 108–9).

The relation of comics with Futurism is even more evident in the superhero genre, in which urban dynamism constitutes the formal framework: "To be a superhero, you've got to be able to move. Superhero narratives are sagas of propulsion, thrust, and movement through the city" (Bukatman 2013, 175). The comic book *übermensch* suggests new, utopian ways of experiencing the cityscape. In the very first page of *AC*#1, we are told that Superman can "leap 1/8th of a mile; hurdle a twenty-story building". In the seventh issue of *AC*, he is described as "running so fast he appears to be a blurred streak of motion" (100). The gridiron of the North American metropolis is thus reinvented by the aesthetic possibilities of imaginative hyperkineticism. As Grant Morrison points out, "Unlike the composed and formal newspaper strips […], the early superhero comics had a driving left-to-right forward momentum, the work of young pioneers defining the form" (2012, 11).[50]

It can be argued that the thematic and formal similarities between comics and Futurism also imply a degree of ideological affinity. As Marek Wasielewski points out,

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the superhero genre was [deeply connected] to modernity's veneration of speed and glorification of industrialized violence. In this, the ideological superstructure of the Golden Age comic-book industry bears striking resemblances to Italian futurism's attempts "to imagine the body's boundaries – as both permeable, shifting, and open to fusion with the environment, and as rigid, closed, and resistant to penetration" (Poggi 1997: 20). Golden Age superhero comics similarly oscillate between depictions of titanic strength or speed and fleeting sequences of panels which fragment and reconstruct these solid bodies in order to generate narrative. […] Cecilia Tichi notes that as a consequence of industrial culture, Machine Age subjectivities were subsumed under a mechanized paradigm – "to be alive in the twentieth century is to see the world for what it is, a complex of mechanized systems" (Tichi 1987: 37) – and Siegel and Shuster projected this mechanized paradigm to its utopian conclusion: a Man of Steel in complete synergy with industrial technology; the technological sublime in human form. (Wasielewski 2009, 66)

However, this critical assessment underestimates the ambivalence that permeates the relation between Golden Age comics and technological modernization. Pre-WW2 Superman, in particular, was rarely 'in complete synergy with industrial technology', and often stood in direct opposition to it. Rather than being straightforward pseudo-Futurist propaganda, the superheroes replicated the "bipolar experience of technology" that was given artistic expression by the avant-garde (Huyssen 1986, 10), and that characterized early science fiction (Mendlesohn 2009, 55). Drawing on the literary tradition of the scientific romance, superhero comics thus translated Wells's "ambivalent and agonizing love-hate relationship with [progress]" (Jameson 2005, 282) into the inherent modernity of the comics medium. As a popular product of cultural modernism, the comic book "contained *both* the modernization euphoria of futurism, constructivism, and Neue Sachlichkeit and some of the starkest critiques of modernization in the various modern forms of 'romantic anti-capitalism'" (Huyssen 1986, 186).

2.5 The Ambivalence of Modernity and Utopia in Superhero Comics: *Superman* and *Batman*

Superman is defined by an ambivalent relationship with scientific and technological modernization since his very first appearance. The cover of *AC*#1 famously depicts him in the act of lifting a car and crashing it against a rock. This climatic moment problematizes the hero's position in a twofold manner. On the one hand, it ambiguates character's ethical stance,

postponing the *anagnorisis* to the inside story: "Based on first appearances alone, this gaudy musclean could be friend or foe, and the only way to answer a multitude of questions is to read on" (Morrison 2012, 8). On the other hand, it inaugurates a recurrent motif throughout Superman's early tales: his ontological status is signified against, and in relation to, "icons of industrial modernity" (Wasielewski 2009, 62). As the announcer of the well-known 1941 animated series claims, Superman is "Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound".[51] He "[rewrites] folk hero John Henry's brave, futile battle with the steam hammer to have a happy ending" (Morrison 2012, 7). In the first issues, to make a few examples, Superman stops a blade with his impenetrable skin (*AC#1,* 13); races and destroys an automobile (15–16); enrols in the army to fight (and end) a war in South America, where "for the first time in all history, a man battles an airplane single-handed!" (*AC#2*, 32); repeatedly races and beats a train (*AC#4*, 51; *AC#5*, 67; *AC#14*, 211); lifts a streetcar (*AC#7*, 88); "crushes [a pistol] to a pulp" (92); stops a rifle bullet with his own chest (*AC#8*, 110); destroys the wells of a petroleum installation (*AC#11*, 155).

However, the Man of Steel is neither depicted as a reactionary luddite, nor as an antimodernist divinity. His insoluble bond with scientific and technological modernity is established in the first page of *AC#1*, in which a brief description of his origins is provided. The first panel shows a glimpse of a futuristic city, with towers and flying machines. The city is being annihilated by explosions, and a space rocket is departing from the roof of a skyscraper. The caption informs us that "as a distant planet was destroyed by old age, a scientist placed his infant son within a hastily devised space-ship, launching it toward Earth!" (8). In the following panel, the 'space-ship' has already landed on earth, and the "sleeping baby" within is discovered by a "motorist". This brief sequence identifies science fiction as the series' generic framework, and the titular character as a space alien. Like the Martians of *WWs*, Superman is escaping a dying planet. However, he does not plan to us his superiority to conquer the earth, since "Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind" (*ibid.*).[52]

Considering the relation between Superman's alienness and heroism, another Wellsian connection can be established. Superman is a utopian saviour who comes from a different time and place, as is Graham in *WSW*. In this regard – and in spite of Graham's Englishness[53] – both characters adhere to paradigm of the twentieth-century American monomythic superhero, who "originates outside the community he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner. His identity is secret,

either by virtue of his unknown origins or his alter ego; his motivation is a selfless zeal for justice" (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 46; see also Lang and Trimble 1988).

A further aspect of this archetypal formulation being shared by two characters concerns the negation of the feminine, which in Superman stems in part from his relation with technology. As Lawrence and Jewett point out, "Patient in the face of provocations, [the superhero] seeks nothing for himself and withstand all temptations. He renounces sexual fulfilment for the duration of the mission, and the purity of his motivation ensures his moral infallibility in judging persons and situations" (2002, 46). In the first edition of *WSW*, Graham and Helen part without expressing their feelings in a tangible way (*WSW*, 469–70). Their love remains platonic, with Helen serving as a catalyst for Graham's political consciousness. Quite interestingly, the relationship between the two was edited in a substantial manner in the subsequent revisions of the novel, to remove any sign of sexual interest or desire (Parrinder 2005, xiii). As Wells himself points out in the "Preface" to the Atlantic Edition,

> The worst thing in the earlier version, and the thing that rankled most in my mind, was the treatment of the relation of Helen Wotton and Graham. […] I have now removed the suggestion of these uncanny connubialities. Not the slightest intimation of any sexual interest could in truth have arisen between these two. They loved, but as a girl and her heroic grandfather might love." (Herbert George Wells [1924] 2005, 4)

An analogous suppression of affection and sexuality characterizes the early Superman tales. Clark Kent pursues Lois Lane, who despises him for being "a spineless, unbearable coward" (*AC*#1, 14). She instead loves and desires Superman, "a real He Man" (*AC*#5, 72), who invariably rejects her, denying the possibility of affective and sexual fulfilment. Wasielewski links Superman's alleged misogyny to his "masculine birth" (2009, 67). Since the alien "is transported to Earth in the steel womb of his father's rocket ship" (*ibid.*), technology substitutes the feminine as origin of the male superhero. He literally is the *deus-ex-machina* of the modern age. As Superman grows up and reaches adulthood, technology also becomes one of his primary interests. In Wells's novel, 'woman' and 'machine' are somehow presented as antithetical choices, and Graham oscillates between loving Helen or his futuristic airplane – "his memory of her eyes and the earnest passion of her face, became more vivid as his mechanical interest fade" (*WSW*, 437). At the end, he chooses to die a climatic death in the company of the latter (470). Superman is less conflicted, and he disregards Lois's attentions to

concentrate on destroying cars and racing trains. Technology is the main target of his destructive hyperactivity, and he never allows a feminine Other to curb his mobility.

At least three reasons for Superman's – and other Golden Age characters' – negation of the feminine can be identified. First of all, the "sexual segmentation" is triggered by the necessity of (potentially endless) serialization: "Sexual renunciation had to become permanent because, if the hero rode off with his bride into the golden sunset as did the Virginian, it would entail creating a new redeemer figure for the next episode" (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 36–37). In second place, the quasi-systematic "exscription of women" (Bongco 2000, 111) is entangled with the genre's articulation of masculinity: "Women are perceived as threats to male independence and masculinity. Sentiment and emotions among superheroes is presented as a weakness that would detract from the masculine business of adventure and power" (113) As Bongco points out, this anxiety "is more understandable when viewed in relation to the superhero comicbooks' main audience – adolescent boys – with their burgeoning and ambiguous concept of dealing with the female and the feminine" (114).[54] The third aspect concerns the cultural background. Superman's celibacy is in fact a characteristic shared by several other 1930s American popular culture incarnations of the superhuman, like Wylie's *Gladiator*. This reflects the decline in popularity of the eugenic movements in America, and the growing association between eugenics and German National Socialism. As Gavaler points out, "To be a post-eugenic Superman is to be isolated and therefore unproductive" (2014, 195) Thus, the superhuman must be sterile, in order not to pose an evolutionary threat to the human race.

Whereas Graham originates in the Victorian past, Superman "comes from Earth's literal eugenic future" (Gavaler 2014, 195). The "Scientific Explanation of Clark Kent's Amazing Strength" in first page of *AC*#1 informs us that "Kent had come from a planet whose inhabitants' physical structure was millions of years advanced of our own. Upon reaching maturity, the people of his race became gifted with titanic strength!" (*AC*#1, 8). An expanded version of the "Scientific Explanation" is provided in *SM*#1, in which we are told that "Superman came to earth from the planet Krypton, whose inhabitants had evolved, after millions of years, to physical perfection! The smaller size of our planet, with its slighter gravity pull, assists Superman's tremendous muscles in the performance of miraculous feats of strength!" (205). These passages further confirm the subversion of the Wellsian model – a specular consideration upon alien physiology and gravity is present in *WWs* –, and at the same time employ science to

legitimate the character's physical superiority (Locke 2005, 30). Siegel and Shuster hence reconfigure the *fin de siècle* anxiety of Wells's romances to suggest a possible utopian outcome of the evolutionary process. As defined by the 1939 promotional comic book for the New York World's Fair, Superman literally is "The Man of Tomorrow" (Siegel and Shuster 2016, 183).

In the Wellsian dialectic of posthumanity and deanthropization, Superman and his Kryptonian ancestors belong in the former category. By contrast, Batman symbolically epitomises the contamination and regression to a pre-human status. The nominal reference to the animal frames him within those pulp heroes – most notably Tarzan – who explore the narrative possibilities of hybridization (Gavaler 2014, 188). Batman's ontological and generic inbetweenness defines his superheroic activity. As a gothic character, he signifies the "mixture of man and beast, of good and evil" that characterizes other "decadent" anti-heroes as "Dorian Gray, Dr. Jekyll, and Dr. Moreu" (Reichstein 1998, 346). As a "wealthy social figure" (*DC*#29, 23) and simultaneously an hardboiled vigilante, Bruce Wayne/Batman represents "the rebellious aspect of the hero and his capacity to function effectively in a world of wealth, corruption, and violence" (Cawelti 1976, 145; see also Croci 2016, 176). Since the earliest apparitions, Batman incorporates the otherness that he antagonizes, and uses it to overcome the threat of parasitic degeneration. Not to become an Eloi, he appropriates the Morlock: "Refiguring gothic tragedies of interbreeding into narratives of triumph, the dual-identity hero – part well-born, part criminal commoner – absorbs the threat of the unfit, while simultaneously improving the well born by purging the upper class of its degenerative parasitism" (Gavaler 2014, 182).

Batman's interstitiality is paralleled by a layered ambivalence towards modernization. At the most visible level, science and technology serve as the hero's enabling force. Since Bruce Wayne famously lacks any supernatural power, he relies on his skills as a "master scientist" (*DC*#33, 67) to craft the tools for his crusade against crime. In his first apparitions, he employs "glass pellets of choking gas" plus "suction gloves and knee pads" (*DC*#29, 23); "gas vials" and a "specially built high-powered auto" (*DC*#30, 34); the "Batgyro" (later renamed "Batplane") and the "Flying Baterang – modeled after the Australian bushman's boomerang!" (*DC*#31, 46); "sleeping gas" (*DC*#36, 112); "glasses of his own invention [with which] the Batman can now *see in the dark* as would be *a real bat*! (*DC*#37, 121, emphasis in the original); and many other inventions. Once associated to the pulp character Doc Savage, the technological utility belt would become one of Batman's most famous trademarks. At the same time, science

and its industrial applications 'produce' the superhero's early villains. Batman's very first apparition, entitled "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate" – a story allegedly plagiarized from a *Shadow* novella (Gavaler 2015, 188) –, revolves around a corrupted chemistry entrepreneur who is eliminating his business partners. As Grant Morrison points out, this story

> established an important trend in the early Batman stories. From the beginning, Batman habitually found himself dealing with crimes involving chemicals and crazy people, and over the years he would take on innumerable villains armed with lethal Laughing Gas, mind-control lipstick, Fear Dust, toxic aerosols, and "artificial phobia" pills. (2012, 21)

Throughout the following issues, Batman meets a remarkable amount of 'mad scientists'. Drawing on a well-established tradition in science fiction and comics (see Locke 2005, 40–42), this stereotype reflects the concerns of Depression-era America: "During the Great Depression of the 1930s, for the first time in American history the public held inventors, engineers, and scientists responsible for economic bad times as greedy industrialists" (Segal 2012, 83). In *DC*#29, Batman thwarts the evil plans of "Doctor Karl Hellfern, later to be more widely known as Doctor Death!" (22), who has created a "death by pollen extract" and plans to use it to "exact my tribute from the wealthy of the world" (22). *DC*#33, "The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom", opens with a dirigible-rocket ship shooting highly destructive "death rays" (76) upon New York City *à la WWs*. The dirigible is piloted by "The Scarlet Order", i.e. "four great scientists" who aim to "rule the world" (70). In the following issue, "Peril in Paris", Batman fights the vicious Duc d'Orterre. The French scientist has invented a "terrible ray" that "burns away" the facial features of people (80), and transplant them into human-faced giant flowers (!). *DC*#36, "Professor Hugo Strange", introduces the eponymous recurring character, defined by Bruce Wayne as "the most dangerous man in the world! Scientist, philosopher and a criminal genius" (104) who has a "brilliant but distorted mind" (105).

A different case in point is "Batman vs the Vampire", the first Batman gothic story proper, serialized in *DC*#31–32. The cover depicts "a vast, hunched Batman figure looming across the horizon to overlook a castle cresting a Romantic peak sampled from a Caspar David Friedrich painting. It was Batman as Dracula, the vampire as hero, preying on the even more unwholesome creatures of the night" (Morrison 2012, 22). Co-written by Gardner Fox, who explored the gothic potential of the early Batman (Daniels 1999, 29–30; Gavaler 2015, 79), it is set in Paris and Hungary – the land of history and *werevolves*" (*DC*#31, 46, emphasis in the original) – and features a supernatural scientist-alchemist, the Monk, as a perverted foil to

Batman (Coogan 2006, 105). The opening caption describes him as "A strange creature, cowled like a monk, but possessing the powers of a Satan! A man whose powers are uncanny, whose brain is the product of years of intense study and seclusion" (*DC*#31, 44). The Monk can be said to incorporate the whole eighteenth-century European gothic tradition: he is a vampire, lives in a castle, possesses the power of hypnosis, and can mutate into a wolf. He even uses a "gigantic gorilla" (51) as an enforcer, evoking Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). Eventually, the vampiresque Monk is killed by Batman, who shoots him a silver bullet with his handgun.[55]

"Batman vs the Vampire" signals a different aspect in the comic book's conflicted representation of modernity. The tale dramatizes the symbolic and epistemological opposition between Batman's American technology on the one hand, and the gothic horrors of the romance on the other. Cognition and estrangement are thus depicted as antithetical forces, and the "cognitive logic" of science fiction as vulnerable to contamination with the "higher 'occult' logic" of "supernatural fantasy proper" (Suvin 1979, 68). Batman's numerous forays into the uncanny suggest in fact that the rational investigative skills of the 'World's Greatest Detective' are threatened by mind-altering, unknowable irrationality. "Am…am I going mad?" (*DC*#34, 84), Batman asks himself as he sees Duc d'Orterre's human-faced flowers. As Wasielewski points out, this science-fantasy dualism is rooted in the very origin of the character.

Batman's first adventures were heavily influenced by the uncanny […] and this points to the dialectic of technocratic "scientifiction," as advocated by editor Hugo Gernsback, and the weird fiction, such as the racialized nightmares of H.P. Lovecraft's *Cthulhu* fiction (Luckhurst 2005: 64). Batman's origin sequence, published in *Detective Comics* no. 33 (November 1939), conjoins scientifiction with the biological uncanny. After witnessing the death of his parents, young Bruce Wayne prays for vengeance in a panel whose Gothic qualities emerge in the heavy shading that obscures half of his face and in the flickering candlelight next to his bed, unusual in an age obsessed with electricity. (Wasielewski 2009, 64)

The sequence entitled "The Batman and how he came to be!" (*DC*#33, 66) continues with the depiction of Bruce Wayne as he "prepares himself for his career". First, "He becomes a master scientist", and the "trains his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats" (*DC*#33, 67). The juxtaposition of these two images "reveals that the chemicals Bruce uses to train his mind catalyze the physical transformation of his body", and that "Bruce transforms himself by an act of alchemy, conducting experiments in the Gothic shadows" (Wasielewski 2009, 64).

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The early Batman tales oscillate between science – both as a hermeneutical tool and enabling force – and the uncanny distortions of the European gothic. The Dark Knight ventures into the hybrid space amid these two representational modes, only to find a weird underworld of "supernatural villains, chemically deranged, archetypal bad-trip fairy-tale nightmares" (Morrison 2012, 23). To an extent, these Batman stories can be thus said to appropriate and remould the compositional patterns of the scientific romance. The early Wells "reworked occult themes in (pseudo-)scientific terms" (K. Williams 2007, 16), and simultaneously transformed science into fantasy and fiction (Pagetti 1986, 19). Forty years later, Batman undermines the presumptions of science and technology through the gothic and the grotesque. His crusade against crime turns into the battle of knowability versus unknowability. As in Wells's romances, observation ultimately fails to produce a coherent scenario (Vallorani 1996b, 283–84). The centre cannot hold, and the gaze fragments into the multiframed space of the comic book page.

Considering Batman's generic hybridity and comparing it with Superman's, some further considerations can be made. In their Golden Age incarnations, the two archetypal superheroes are characterized by a cross-contamination that subverts the readers' expectations *vis-à-vis* the formulaic conventions of the genres. Drawing (also) upon the tradition of pulp vigilantes, Batman begins his adventures in a recognizable realist scenario, i.e. "the 'urban jungle' of the Depression era" (McFarland 2005, 58). However, he is soon re-located into the secluded and isolated locations of gothic fiction, in which to face the distorted reflections of his persona (see Reichstein 1998, 347). Superman, by contrast, comes into being as a science-fiction character, but his subsequent exploits are firmly rooted in the realist scenario of late-1930s America. Rather than aliens or supervillains, in his early tales he antagonizes a wife-beater (*AC*#1, 13) and a Washington weapon lobbyist (19); a "munition magnate" (*AC*#2, 22); a corrupt mine owner (*AC*#3); the sadistic superintendent of a chain-gang who inflicts "shocking cruelties" upon his prisoners (*AC*#10, 131); dishonest businessmen who sell "worthless stocks" (AC#11, 145) and drive investors to commit suicide; a crooked automobile manufacturer who deliberately sells defective products (*AC*#12*,* 165) . In spite of the outlandishness of his powers and persona, Superman deals with the tangible iniquities of American modernity. In this regard, he is similar to the anti-heroes of the hardboiled novel, a sub-genre which was gaining popularity in the very same decade. Like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler's detectives, Clark Kent is an idealistic urban hero, a "tough loner on a crusade against social

corruption" (Scaggs 2005, 64). He exposes and the crime and exploitation behind the façade of the modern American city.

Another significant trait is shared by the superhero and the hardboiled PIs. In his early tales, Superman's main opponent are rarely common criminals, as thieves or murderers. Instead, he fights the corrupt manifestations of power and authority, often foregrounding the connection with the rise of urban plight and social decay. As Philip Marlowe, he "demonstrates that those who have achieved wealth and status are weak, dishonourable, and corrupt" (Cawelti 1976, 157). Several critics have scrutinized this facet of Superman's characterization, linking it with the historical context and the development of the genre. Andrae points out that Siegel and Shuster's comic book superhero subverts the tropes of previous Depression-era superman stories, in which the irresponsibility of the scientist and the entrepreneur is "projected onto the masses whose potentially revolutionary impulses are stigmatized as deriving from the same causes as the nation's economic ills" (1980, 96). This is the compositional process informing, for instance, Siegel's own previous RS. In the comic book, irresponsible entrepreneurship is instead depicted in an unequivocal way as the root of the social problems. In *AC#1*, a weapon lobbyist and a corrupt senator plan to embroil the US in a war against Europe for profit (18). As the munitions magnate behind the lobbyist points out, "men are cheap – munitions, expensive!" (*AC#2*, 27). In the third issue, Superman faces an unscrupulous mine owner, who refuses to provide a safe work environment for his miners. Interrogated by Clark Kent about the lack of safety measures, the proprietor claims that "There are no safety hazards in my mine. But if there were – what of it? I'm a business man not a humanitarian!" (*AC#3*, 40).

Superman thus comes to embody the "humanitarian" aspect that is virtually absent in capitalism and, by extension, modernity. He is a "Friend to the helpless and oppressed" *(AC#7*, 88). Grant Morrison describes the character as "a hero of the people. The original Superman was a bold humanist response to Depression-era fears of runaway scientific advance and soulless industrialism" (2012, 6). As Gavaler points out, "Unlike his Nietzschean counterpart, Siegel and Shuster's Superman fought for the common man, battling unscrupulous business from Wall Street to college football fields" (2016, 75). No one is left alone: laborers, small investors, mistreated women, slum kids, even chain-gang prisoners – Superman strives "for their security and for a change in their conditions" (Lund 2016, 87).[56] He is, in Siegel's own words, "a modern Robin Hood" (*SM#1*, 206). *Mutatis mutandis*, the superhero thus represents a return to Wells's primeval idea of a socialist, utopian *übermensch*, here updated and

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Americanized as a New Deal reformer (Sabin 1993, 145; Tye 2012, 45–46; Lund 2016, 85–95). Considering the relationship between the comic book and Roosevelt's policies, Andrae suggests that Superman "reflects the collectivist ethos of the nascent welfare state" (1980, 98). The character epitomizes the transition from a pre-Depression-era cult of individualism to a "organizational ideal of success through self-sacrifice and collective effort under the direction of a strong leader" (95–96). At the same time, he signals the growing concern towards the rights of workers, mirroring the spirit of the 1935 Social Security Act and the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.

To scrutinize the different narrative and ideological strands of Superman's reformism, at least two stories are worth considering in detail. Later entitled "Superman in the Slums", *AC#8* explores the utopian and subversive potential of the character's New Deal activism. The issue opens with a courtroom scene, in which a young criminal – the seemingly Italian-American Frankie Marello – is being tried for assault and battery. Clark Kent is moved by the plea of Frankie's mother: "he's [Frankie] only like all the other boys in our neighbourhood… hard, resentful, underprivileged. He's my only son, sir he might have been a good boy except for his environment" (102). Kent agrees that there exists a connection between juvenile crime and built environment. He tells Frankie's fellow gang members "It's not entirely your fault that you're delinquent – it's these slums – your poor living conditions – if there was only some way I could remedy it –!" (112). Soon, a remedial is found. He first prevents the young gangsters from committing other crimes, and when it is too late, he frees them from the custody of police: "I've got to hurry, if I'm to save those youngsters from the police and from themselves!" (106). He then goes on a rampage and demolishes the blighted neighbourhood, "When I finish, this town will be rid of its filthy, crime-festering slums" (113). Even though the National Guard attempts to stop him, he manages to raze the area: "Behind him he leaves what formerly where the slums, but now, a desolate shambles…" (114). Superman is aware that, thanks to the Public Works Administration, "the government rebuilds destroyed areas with modern cheap-rental apartments" (113).[57] In fact, "During the next weeks, the wreckage is cleared. Emergency squads commence erecting huge apartment-projects… and in time the slums are replaced by splendid housing conditions" (114). The issue ends with the ideologically ambiguous remark of the police chief: "we'll spare no effort to apprehend Superman – but off the record… I think he did a splendid thing" (114). In depicting the character as a eutopian transformative agent, this story reveals the collectivist ideology of the early Superman comics: "the hero puts social welfare and the

combatting of the causes of crime in the government's hands, suggesting not a celebration of unilateral individualism but a liberal collectivist ideological bent" (Lund 2016, 90). In addition, the tale shows in a clear manner that, despite his subversive potential, Superman is not a revolutionist, but only a reformist. He "[tweaks] the system while being careful not to upend it" (Tye 2012, 46). The message is conservative. As a 1910s muckraker (see Maffi [1981] 2013, 128), Superman's anti-establishment stance actually confirms the perfectibility of the system.

However, the superhero's subversive attitude also introduces a trope that a would be conventionalized as a foundational formula of the whole genre (see Bongco 2000, 93–94, 103). His New Deal activism puts Superman at odds with the forces of law and order (Andrae 1980, 99). Even though the American institutions are ultimately shown as capable of restoring the order and improving the life of the citizens, the hero's utopian plan is fulfilled through extra-legal means. According to Bainbridge,

> From the beginning then, the superhero was a way of addressing societal problems. […] While Superman acknowledges a need for the legal system […] there is already the sense of Superman taking matters into his own hands and, in the political corruption story, a healthy distrust of institutions. (2007, 456)

This suggests another significant parallel with hardboiled fiction. In showing that "justice may be something quite apart from law, something that exists *outside* the legal system" (Bainbridge 2007, 460, emphasis in the original), the superhero upholds the PI's "denial of laws and regulations in favour of a personal code of justice (Scaggs 2005, 63). As Hammett's Continental Op, Superman is "forced to define his own concept of morality and justice, frequently in conflict with the social authority of the police" (Cawelti 1976, 142).

The law-justice dissociation and the antagonist relationship with police are further explored in *AC*#12. The story opens with Clark Kent casually assisting the death of a friend, "hit by a reckless driver" (158). Since he believes that his city has "one of the worst traffic situations in the country", he first invokes the help of the authorities. He telephones the city major, who is unable to provide help: "It's really too bad – but – what can anyone do about it?" (*ibid.*). Superman thus decides to 'take the matter into his own hands'. He breaks into a radio stations to broadcast his menacing message:

> The auto accident death rate of this community is one that should shame us all! It's constantly rising and due entirely to reckless driving and inefficiency! More people have

been killed needlessly by autos than died during the World War! From this moment on, I declare war on reckless drivers – henceforth homicidal drivers answer to *me*! (160).

As an archetypal monomythic hero, Superman epitomizes the idea that the deficiencies of society cannot be addressed by democratic institutions (see Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 26). Throughout the rest of the issue, the superhero goes berserk and attacks cars and drivers, deemed responsible for an 'unnecessary' massacre. First, he goes to the impound lot in which "the autos of traffic violators are temporarily stored" (160) and "commences to systematically smash and tear them to a pulp". He then wreaks havoc in a used-car dealer "which sells completely dilapidated autos" (161), and "gleefully" tears down a car factory in which "inferior metal and parts [are used] so as to make higher profits at the cost of human lives!" (165). Superman's crusade for social justice dangerously veers into full-fledged anti-capitalism. He is opposed by police, but "hundreds of officers" prove to be "incapable of stopping the mad course of one hoodlum!" (168). *AC#12* encapsulates the narrative and ideological strands of the early Superman. At the same time, it highlights the ambiguities woven into the character. The Man of Steel contrasts – only to amend them – the iniquities of American capitalism and modernization. He is depicted as an instrument of social betterment, but only if he may move outside the boundaries of the law. As Andrew Hoberek points out,

> In this story, Superman acts in ways that we might associate with supervillains: breaking rather than upholding the law and gleefully destroying private property — even when such destruction is unmerited and unprovoked, as with the radio station's ill-fated walls. He does so, however, in the interest of the public good and in service of the modern value, as he declares, of efficiency. Superman in this story clearly represents modernity, or more specifically a counter-modernity posed against the destructive version unleashed by technology and capital. (2016, 116)

This quote also raises the issue of Superman's utopian proactivity. This aspect relates to the character's social activism on the one hand, and the inherent authoritarianism of the archetype on the other. *AC#8* and *AC#12* display in a clear manner the way in which the early incarnation of the character does merely address criminal events after they have happened (see Coogan 2006, 113–14). His actions are not only limited to the restoration of a previous order. Drawing on the tradition of Wells's romance, and being himself a "utopian impossibility" (Yockey 2012, 350), Superman actively works to build a better society. He projects the wish-fulfilment that informs his ontological status into the creation of a (variously cognitive) "alternative historical hypothesis" (Suvin 1979, 49). He mirrors the idea by which "Utopia does

constitute a working synthesis" of the "reality principle of SF and the pleasure principle of fantasy" (Jameson 2005, 74).

Nonetheless, this process is achieved through anti-democratic means. Superman uses violence and physical intimidation to implement his personal view of social justice: "You see that steamer? […] Unless I find you aboard it when it sails, I swear I'll follow you to whatever hole you hide in, and tear out your cruel hearth with my bare hands" (*AC#2*, 23). Epitomizing the principle by which 'might makes right', he arbitrarily decides when the law must be upheld, and when it must be broken. In *AC#12*, more than once he disregards the right to private property, but then he reproaches the city major for "not seeing to it that the speed laws were strictly enforced" (169). Despite his genuine concern for the disadvantaged and the oppressed, Superman – and after him the superhero genre – thus reveals an authoritarian ideological underpinning (Wasielewski 2009, 68). Gavaler defines the early Superman as "a fantasy of benign totalitarianism" (2016, 76), in which fascist means are "redirected to defend democracy" (81). As *WSW*'s Graham, he epitomizes the dream of a compromise between a strong, central individual and the collective benefit (see Vallorani 1996a, 40). However, the early Superman also foregrounds the alleged link between utopianism and "force, violence, and totalitarianism" that, as Sargent points out, constituted a one of the most compelling arguments against utopianism in the twentieth century (1994, 24). As we are going to see, the inherent totalitarianism of the superhero archetype will be scrutinized in the revisionist graphic novel of the 1980s.

From a generic standpoint, Superman's utopian proactivity and social activism constitute a major compositional problem. The construction of utopia is in fact at odds with the open-ended serial form of superhero comics. In a potentially endless serialization, utopia constitutes a narrative dead end. It can be argued that the issue is rooted in the hybrid nature of the archetype, which combines the scientific romance with the pulps serials of the early twentieth century. In superheroes, the eutopian/dystopian reconfigurations of Wells's early fiction are woven into the formulaic patterns of popular genres. However, the radical alteration of the fictional environment displayed in, for instance, *WWs* is incompatible with the need for a recurring protagonist and scenario of serial crime fiction. Drawing on both these traditions, superhero comics engage in a continuous negotiation between the two fictional and narrative modes. Superman strives for a just, crimeless society that cannot be achieved, for its realization would deprive the character of its *raison d'être*. Economic reasons demand that new instalments

be produced on a monthly basis, and hence the Man of Tomorrow is unable conclude his narrative arc (Wolf-Meyer 2003, 512). Superhero comics thrive off a "dialectical energy that promises (but never realizes) utopian resolution" (Yockey 2012, 360). Utopia is desired and simultaneously disavowed. It is fetishized as a visible, but unattainable goal.

The fetishization of utopia can be seen as a specific articulation of the fundamental tension between 'myth' and 'romance' that, according to Eco (1972), characterizes superhero comics. In "The Myth of Superman", whose Italian edition had been published in 1964, the semiologist analyses the twofold ontology of comic-book superheroes. He argues that

> The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore, he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable (this is what happens to Superman); but since he is marketed in the sphere of a "romantic" production for a public that consumes "romances," he must be subjected to a development which is typical, as we have seen, of novelistic characters. (1972, 15)

Within this conceptual framework, the novelistic strand of the character underpins his utopianism as cognitive articulation of a historical alternative. By contrast, the mythical aspect dehistoricizes Superman's utopian impulse as well as his ontological status, trapping him into an "immobilizing metaphysics" (22).

In order to overcome the narrative paradox of a mythical character in a novelistic world, Eco argues, Superman's authors resort to a paradoxical treatment of temporality. The events narrated consume time – the story ending happens *after* the beginning –, but are not situated in time. Chronological development is only intradiegetic, never infradiegetic.[58] This means that

> The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate – of which the reader is not aware at all – where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said. (Eco 1972, 17)

The character and the reader are stuck in an endless second act. Superman is condemned to a series of anaesthetic micro-closures, while the cognitive seriation of events is hindered. As Eco concludes, "Superman is obliged to continue his activities in the sphere of small and infinitesimal modifications of the immediately visible […]: each general modification would draw the world, and Superman with it, toward final consumption" (22). This model would

remain unchallenged until the rise of the super hero graphic novels in the 1980s. In these self-contained texts, proper narrative closure is achievable, and the utopian potentialities of the archetype can be fully explored.[59]

In addition to the "oneiric climate", at least two other strategies have been elaborated to overcome the incompatibly between the character's inherent utopianism and open-ended serialization. These strategies are not meant as alternatives, since all them have been institutionalized as features of the superhero genre. The first relies on a specific structuration of the hero-villain antagonism. Superhero comics would soon conventionalize the conflict between a proactive villain and a reactive hero. This means that "The villain's machinations drive the plot. The hero reacts to the villain's threat, which justifies the hero's violence" (Coogan 2006, 110). In utopian terms, villains hence serve as primary transformative agents (see Gray 2010, 40). Since they will always be defeated, they are allowed to envisage utopian/dystopian transformations of the world and their persona. The hero's duty is to thwart these attempts, and prevent a radical alteration of the environment in which s/he and the reader live. Superheroes are, in a word, reactionary (Klock 2002, 39).

The second strategy entails the progressive depoliticization of the superhero figure, which is deprived of the most subversive aspects. This dynamic can be better understood if we compare Superman with Batman, and the early Superman with the late Superman. Created less than one year after Siegel and Shuster's prototype, Batman represents superhero comics' political and social disengagement. In this regard, the New Deal activism may be identified as the most visible point of difference between the two archetypal characters. Whereas Superman foregrounds the iniquities of heartless capitalism, Batman belongs to the class that is held responsible for the nation's economic problems. The Man of Tomorrow may be seen as a "socialist", but the Dark Knight is unequivocally "the ultimate capitalist hero" (Morrison 2012, 26). It can be hypothesized that Batman's frequent forays into the occult serve to distance him from the ideological impasses arising from his status. Even though he is a "bored young socialite" (*DC#28*, 15), a "wealthy social figure" (*DC#29*, 23) who has inherited a fortune from his father, his remedies for crime seem at best palliative. He could use his huge financial means and his technological expertise to help eradicate poverty. He might create jobs, and alleviate the late Depression-era unemployment. However, "doing so would be promoting economic equality and putting his own wealth and place in an established social hierarchy at risk, so he instead puts on tights and a cape and proceeds to savagely beat anyone who gets in his way"

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(Corey 2012).[60] Therefore, in order not engage with Batman's structural ineffectiveness, the early authors – Gardner Fox above all (Gavaler 2015, 79) – displace him from the complexities of contemporary urban America. They rather transplant him into the inward and secluded dimension of the European gothic (see Reichstein 1998, 347). At the same time, they characterize Gotham city as a dystopian nightmare of street crime, leading the reader to "empathize uncritically with the hero's actions" (Uricchio 2010, 125).

An analogous ideological manipulation characterizes the Superman stories after the first year of serialization. Published in June 1939, *AC*#13 introduces the first recurring super-villain, the Ultra-Humanite, who signifies a substantial shift towards science fiction (Tye 2012, 46). Siegel's story opens with a classic premise: a syndicate is terrorizing taxy companies into paying protection money. However, the ending reveals that the racketeering is orchestrated by the Ultra-Humanite, who is in fact "the head of a vast ring of evil enterprises" (194). To an extent, displaying a quintessential mad scientist as the mastermind responsible of crime diminishes the strength of the series' social criticism. For all his power, a single and monomaniacal 'rotten apple' is less threatening than a systemic social corruption, since it can be easily defeated by the superhero. The appearance of the Ultra-Humanite symbolizes Superman's progressive disengagement and loss of subversiveness.[61] It ushers in an era in which the superhero's consciousness is "civic" rather than "political" (Eco 1972, 22). Superman's proactive utopianism hibernates, as his mission turns into the perpetual preservation of private property.

The anti-establishment and authoritarian working class hero was out of place in post-Depression America. In addition, sales and merchandise were making Superman too valuable a property to display ambiguous political sympathies. In fact, the years between 1939 and 1941 saw the normalization and the institutionalization of the character as wholesome role model for both adults and children: "No killing unless he had to, and the only with his bare hands. No destroying private property. No hint of sex. No alienating parents or teachers" (Tye 2012, 47). Instead of pursuing left-wing vigilante justice, Superman must fight for 'Truth, Justice and the American Way'. This does not mean that in the early forties Superman was altogether deprived of political aspects. However, he found himself on the other side of the fence. Soon after Pearl Harbour, the Man of Steel was be incorporated into the establishment, and turned into a WW2 propaganda instrument (Andrae 1980, 100; Sabin 1993, 146). As Morrison argues, "our

socialist, utopian, humanist hero was slowly transformed into a marketing tool, a patriotic stooge, and, worse: the betrayer of his own creators" (2012, 16).

Throughout the 1940s and the early 1950s, growing self-regulation (i.e. self-censorship) attempted to sanitize Superman, the whole superhero genre, and comic books in general. The subversive character of the late 1930s had to be contained. In 1940, National new editor Whitney Ellsworth launched an ethical code for the authors (Daniels 1998, 41–42), in which it was stated that

> the policy of Superman DC Publications is to provide interesting, dramatic, and reasonably exciting entertainment without having recourse to such artificial devices as the use of exaggerated physical manifestations of sex, sexual situations, or situations in which violence is emphasized sadistically. Good people should be good, and bad people bad, without middle ground shading. Good people need not be "stuffy" to be good, but bad people should not be excused. Heroes should act within the law, and for the law. (quoted in Sergi 2012b)

This attempt at self-regulation was accompanied by a nation-wide anti-comics concern, which started to spread among critics of mass culture and the general public. On the 8th of May 1940, the Chicago Daily News published Sterling North's article "A National Disgrace", in which comic book were defined as "a poisonous mushroom growth of the last two years. Ten million copies of these sex-horror serials are sold every month. One million dollars are taken from the pockets of America's children in exchange for graphic insanity" (1940, 56).

Throughout the following fifteen years, comic books were at the centre of a heated debate. Deemed a threat to literacy, they were accused of racism, violence, and perverting the young with images of sex and horror. Several comic book burning happened in the late 1940s, as in Chicago and New York (Sergi 2012a). The anti-comics hysteria reflected the cultural concerns of post-war America. It found an intellectual framework in the wider critique of mass culture brought about by the Frankfurt school and the New York intellectuals. As Bart Beaty points out,

> The quick rise of widespread concern about the increasing moral decadence and potentially fascist spirit of the comic book points to the way that the medium was rapidly caught up in ongoing discourses about mass culture that predated the form itself and shaped the way that it was received by critics and ultimately the public. As the war concluded, these concerns did not abate but rather grew prodigiously to the point that the industry had no choice but to respond with a facade of restraint. The factors that contributed to postwar efforts at self-regulation can be seen in the intersection of comic books and the general critique of mass culture. (2005, 115)

To curb the growing moral panic, a self-regulation organization was established in 1948. The Association of Comics Magazine Publishers created a code of conduct which banned "sex, crime, sadistic torture, vulgar language, divorce, and racism" (Beaty 2005, 119). However, several major houses – as National – refused to join the association, preferring their own forms of self-regulation, and the code remained largely unapplied.

The anti-comic books crusade culminated in 1954 with publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*. A German-born psychiatrist and mass culture critic, Wertham was primarily interested in the eradication of violence – and in particular juvenile violence – from society. He had been written about the detrimental effects of comics since 1948, when he argued in *Saturday Review of Literature* that "the common denominator in juvenile delinquency was comic books" (Beaty 2005, 119). Displaying a strong disdain for mass culture, and written with the layperson in mind, *Seduction of the Innocent* discusses comics as "an agent with harmful potentialities. They bring about a mass conditioning of children, with different effects in the individual case" (Wertham 1954, 118). Throughout the book, Wertham argues that

1) The comic-book format is an invitation to illiteracy.

2) Crime comic books create an atmosphere of cruelty and deceit.

3) They create a readiness for temptation.

4) They stimulate unwholesome fantasies.

5) They suggest criminal or sexually abnormal ideas.

6) They furnish the rationalization for them, which may be ethically even more harmful than the impulse.

7) They suggest the forms a delinquent impulse may take and supply details of technique.

8) They may tip the scales toward maladjustment or delinquency. (118).

One of the privileged targets of his critique are superheroes, which he subsumes under the label of crime comics. Wertham believes that Superman glorifies violence and racism, and associates the character with Nazism:

> Superman (with the big S on his uniform-we should, I suppose, be thankful that it is not an S.S.) needs an endless stream of ever new submen, criminals and "foreign-looking" people not only to justify his existence but even to make it possible. It is this feature that engenders in children either one or the other of two attitudes: either they fantasy themselves as supermen, with the attendant prejudices against the submen, or it makes them submissive

and receptive to the blandishments of strong men who will solve all their social problems for them-by force. (1954, 34)

Wertham's critique of Batman focusses instead on alleged homosexual innuendos: "In [Batman] stories there are practically no decent, attractive, successful women. […] The atmosphere is homosexual and anti-feminine. If the girl is good-looking she is undoubtedly the villainess. If she is after Bruce Wayne, she will have no chance against Dick [i.e. Robin]" (191). He thus concludes that "The Batman type of story may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies, of the nature of which they may be unconscious" (*ibid.*).

Along with the coeval Senate hearings on the comic book industry and juvenile delinquency, S*eduction of the Innocent* was the final nail in the coffin. It led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), an institution of self-censorship that reviewed stories before publication.[62] The 'Code' itself was modelled upon the unenforced 1948 predecessor (Round 2013, 338) and the 1934 Motion Picture Production Code (Gardner 2012, 103).[63] It stated that "Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of the law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals" (quoted in Sabin 1993, 251), and also that "Passion and romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions" (253). If a comic failed to adhere to the ethical standards it would not be sold, for distributors and retailers generally refused to carry non-approved books (Morrison 2012, 57). As Sabin points out, "the institution of the Code was a commercial disaster for American comics. Genres were virtually destroyed, particularly crime and horror, creators left in the field to work elsewhere and entire companies were forced out of business" (1993, 163).

With hindsight, it would be difficult to assess the extent to which the Code prevented comics from developing as a medium, and superheroes as a genre. While it is true that self-censorship caused generic stagnation and the sanitization of comics' subversiveness, it cannot entirely be blamed for the infantilization of characters and storylines. For instance, it has been shown that the inherent utopianism and the political engagement of the superhero genre had already been stifled years before *Seduction of the Innocent* and the anti-comics crusades. To an extent, Wertham and the Code can also be credited for having triggered the creation of a space of cultural negotiation and artistic freedom outside the boundaries of mainstream superhero comics. As Baetens and Frey suggest,

while Wertham's theories were damaging to comics and comic creation, they did imbue the medium with great public significance and import. The later, longer development of the graphic novel occurred against this backdrop. Comics being stigmatized so powerfully pushed creators to challenge the marginal position from which they now started. *Grosso modo*, adult comics and graphic novels can be understood as an antithesis to the stigmatizing emphasis of the postwar moral scare. (2015, 32)

From this perspective, the underground 'comix' of the late 1960s and the independent comics of the 1970s were created (also) as a reaction to the creative immobility of mainstream comics.

Throughout this chapter, we have seen the ways in which Wells's romances and ideas percolated through American popular culture since the early twentieth century. From the reprint in pulp magazines to the production of original material, Wells ultimately influenced the creation of superheroes in the late 1930s. The fruitful ambiguities of the scientific romance were thus inscribed into the open-ended narrative of comics, endowing it with a potential that was briefly expressed at the inception of the genre. However, the utopian imaginings were displaced by the need for endless serialization, while the thematic exploration was conditioned by the normalization and self-censorship of the entire industry. For the superhero genre to express its full utopian potential, and at the same continue the interrogation of (post-)modernity, we will have to wait for more than three decades. In the 1980s, the emergence of the graphic novel would provide the formal framework for a sophisticated exploration of the superhero archetype, and for the revision of the basic formulas on which the whole genre was founded. At the same time, a generation of British graphic novelists would cross the Atlantic, and provide their own subversive interpretation of American comics and its relationship with American culture. They would reinstate the superhero as utopian agent, bringing the Wellsian ontological and epistemological ambiguities to their logical conclusions. At turn of the century, Wells envisaged an illuminated intelligentsia to bring humanity to its utopian future. Eighty years later, this utopian future was on the verge of becoming a nightmare.

3 Graphic Novel, Superheroes and Utopia: The Case of Alan Moore

> *I never said 'The superman exists and he's American'. What I said was 'God exists and he's American'.*
>
> Alan Moore, *Watchmen* (1986-87)

> *Now there are really only two extreme points that you can project the world to. One of them is Utopia, the other is Apocalypse.*
>
> Alan Moore, in Khoury (2003)

This chapter considers the way in which the structural ambiguities of early American superhero comics emerged in the 1980s through a radical reconceptualization of the medium, genre, and archetype. In particular, I take into account the work of British author Alan Moore, whose ground-breaking graphic novels explore the (anti-)utopian and dystopian possibilities of the superhero genre, while reframing it within postmodernity. Revising the genre's formulaic conventions, Moore deconstructs the assumptions that have been inscribed in the archetype since the 1930s, or even before. As he opens up the genre to new, radical readings, he also returns to the Wellsian roots of the character, appropriating and reinvigorating the dystopian anxiety of works like *WWs* and *WSW*.

Along with few other creators, Moore can be credited for having brought a literary sensibility to American comics, and for having contributed to the sophistication and the formal maturation of the medium. Not only did Moore help "transform the mainstream comic book industry into one in which writers rather than artists were the starts" (Hoberek 2014, 35), but he also introduced the superhero genre to an adult, literate readership. As Kawa points out, "Alan Moore made his mark by tackling the narrative paradoxes of the superhero genre (such

as its uneasy status as a popular idiom with authoritarian overtones) and offering narratives dominated by an almost perverse rationality" (2009, 168).

Before moving to the case studies, it is necessary to discuss the formal, thematic, and cultural framework that enabled Moore's revision. The first section considers the rise of the graphic novel as self-contained, "long-form" comics narrative (see Hatfield 2005, 4–6). This novelistic form eschews the open-endedness of conventional superhero comics, while allowing for a cognitive seriation of the events. The thematic aspect concerns the development of what Geoff Klock defines as the "revisionary superhero narrative" (2002, 25), i.e. a bold and postmodern misreading of superhero comics' generic formulas. The last part considers the cultural significance of the so-called 'British Invasion', namely a generation of English, Scottish and Northern Irish authors who have revitalized and commented upon one of the most recognizable figures of American popular culture.

I then examine three 1980s graphic novels written by Moore: *Miracleman* (1982-89), *V for Vendetta* (1982-89) and *Watchmen* (1986-87). Drawing on superheroes' inherent modernity and utopianism, these works negotiate three different but relatable textual positions. *Miracleman* appropriates and re-contextualizes the formulas into a 'realist' British scenario, and uses the superhero to analyse the defining characteristics of postmodernity. The text takes the genre's "poetic, utopian strand to its own logical conclusions" (Morrison 2012, 229), while producing an anti-utopian destabilization of its own fundamental premises. *V for Vendetta* is a critical dystopia, which posits the superhero as utopian enclave within a dystopian exaggeration of contemporary trends. The graphic novel echoes Wells's, Huxley's and Orwell's dystopias to articulate a sophisticated critique of Margaret Thatcher and her policies (Di Liddo 2009, 111–15). The postmodern interrogation of superhero utopianism also lies at the core of Moore's *magnum opus Watchmen*. In a uchronic, sci-fi analogy to 1980s United States, Moore employs different versions of the superhero archetype to stage the conflict between eutopia and dystopia, both meant as historical hypotheses and philosophical concepts. As Murphy argues, "Alongside the psychology of superheroism, *Watchmen* effectively explores the antinomies of dystopia and eutopia; yet, its dystopian darkness gets so dark that it eventually moves from dystopia to antiutopia, wherein utopia and utopianism in general are more destructive to people's lives than nuclear Armageddon or alien invasion" (2009, 476).

3.1 Graphic Novel and Revisionary Superhero Narrative.

Emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, the graphic novel has constituted an important formal and editorial device for the legitimation of comics. Often criticized as a mere marketing tool, "the graphic novel has escaped the cultural exclusion of much of the comics universe and has gained great respect, not least in the United States, one of the pioneer homes of comics and comic books" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 2). Continuing the artistic maturation initiated by underground comix in the late 1960s, graphic novels have confirmed the medium as a viable platform for adult, complex, and sophisticated narratives. This does not mean that relevant comic strips or books have not been produced before – and are not produced today. Neither does it imply that intellectual recognition uniquely depends on the 'novelization' of comics. In fact, as early as 1924, renowned cultural critic Gilbert Sedes had defined George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* as "the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America to-day" (Sedes 1924, 231; see also Beaty 2012, 105). However, it is undeniable that the popular and academic perception of the medium has been altered in a significant way by the emergence of (variously) self-contained book-length comics,[1] open to genres other than superheroes and talking animals, and sold in bookstores and specialized shops instead of newsstands. This latter aspect bears a particular significance. In the US, the 1970s saw the creation of a system of direct sales, "whereby instead of publishers selling bundles of a mixture of comics in the expectation of a large number of returns […], they could now print exactly the number required by the specialist shops, and sell directly to them by means of specialized distribution" (Sabin 1993, 66). The direct market did not altogether replace newsstand distribution, which still exists today, but created a method for publishers to bypass the CCA and sell comics without the Seal of Approval (Nyberg 1998, 144–45). Along with conventional bookstore retailing, the direct sales created a physical and symbolic space for mainstream comics to overcome the censorship established in the 1950s.

Elaborating a straightforward definition for the graphic novel is a daunting task. The flexibility with which authors, publishers, and readers have employed the phrase complicates the crystallization of a univocal meaning. As Charles Hatfield points out,

> a graphic novel can be almost anything: a novel, a collection of interrelated or thematically similar stories, a memoir, a travelogue or journal, a history, a series of vignettes or lyrical observations, an episode from a longer work – you name it. Perhaps this very plasticity

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helps explain the currency of the term. What might have seemed at first to denote a distinct genre has instead become an all-purpose tag for a vague new class of social object (one that, unlike the "comic book," need not be grounded in the exact specifications of a given physical format). (Hatfield 2005, 5)

A useful definitional taxonomy is provided by Roger Sabin in *Adult Comics* (1993). He individuates three kinds of graphic novels, the first being "a one-shoot book-form publication involving a continuous comics narrative, of a scope that is longer than a normal comic. In production terms, it is published without prior serialisation: the analogy is with the majority of prose novels" (235). This mode of publication does not dominate the field as happens with prose literature, and one of the possible reasons may be the significant amount of time needed for an artist to complete a lengthy graphic novel. Recent notable examples include Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) and David Small's *Stitches* (2009).

Sabin's second kind "can be described as a 'pre-serialised' work, which is to say that it appears in section in an anthology comic before being collected into a volume. […] The analogy here is with bit-part novel publishing in the last century, as exemplified by the work of Charles Dickens" (1993, 235). Anthological serialization was prominent in the post-underground era. During the 1970s and 1980s, American magazines as *Arcade* (created in 1975), *Heavy Metal* (1977, the English-language counterpart to *Métal Hurlant*), *Raw* (1980), *Weirdo* (1981), and the British *Action* (1976)*, 2000AD* (1977)*, Warrior* (1982) featured the most-renowned authors of the time, laying the foundation for the 'graphic novel movement'. [2] Today, however, anthologies have lost significance, or have ceased publication. To an extent, they have been replaced by limited series, which are first serialized as comic books and the collected in a single or multiple volumes. This formula contributed to the success of *Vertigo*, DC Comics' imprint for adult comics created in 1993 that published classics as Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989-1996) and Garth Ennis's *Preacher* (1995-2000).

The process of collecting a pre-serialized comic book is also central to the third kind of graphic novel individuated by Sabin, i.e. "'a section of a comics continuity' […]. If we think of such comics as soap-operas, then a graphic novel can be a collection of four or six or twelve or however many instalments in a single volume, with the added provision that the creator has consciously worked towards the longer framework" (Sabin 1993, 235–36). This model characterizes modern superhero comic. Here, story-arcs often authored by a single writer and/or artist are collected in thematically-cohesive e variously self-contained trade paperbacks. This

is the case, for instance, of Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's *Year One*, a Batman graphic novel that was serialized in the issues 404 to 407 of the eponymous comic book series in 1987.

Apart from the "scope that is longer than a normal comic", Sabin's taxonomy does not specify formal, compositional, or stylistic features of the graphic novel. Even though this genericity allows for the inclusion of different and unorthodox manifestation of long-form comics, it glosses over several ideological and editorial issues. For instance, a problematic aspect concerns the implicit consolidation of the 'novel' (i.e. literature) as hegemonic form of narrativity in the process of demarginalization and legitimation of comics (Bavaro and Izzo 2008, 11–12). The alleged erosion of the historical divide between comics and literature is achieved through the subsumption of the former under the latter. Another problem relates to the widespread use of 'graphic novel' for works that do not have a proper novelistic form. Throughout the decades, the phrase has in fact been used for collection of short stories or non-fictional comics, like Joe Sacco's reportages (Wolk 2007, 62).

It should also not be underestimated that "the term 'graphic novel' encourages (a set of) expectations" (Meyer 2013, 275; see also Hatfield 2005, 5).[3] One of these assumptions concerns the adult and sophisticated quality of the narrative. As Baetens and Frey point out, graphic novel has been used "as useful shorthand for either adult readership comic books or single volume comics the qualities (content or artwork) of which distinguish them as exceptional when compared to regularly serialized titles or more generic material superheroes, sci-fi, or fantasy" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 3). The idea that graphic novels may attract older readers stems in part from the erroneous postulate that comic strips and books are inherently products for children. From a historical perspective, the view of comics as juvenile entertainment crystallized during the comics scare of the 1940s and 1950s, when Wertham's theories identified comics as a threat against America's youth (Bavaro and Izzo 2008, 8; Round 2013, 339). The subsequent application of the 1954 Code sanitized and juvenilized mainstream comics, further confirming the public perception of the medium as an instrument of puerile escapism (Hatfield 2005, 11).

Graphic novels are also characterized by the centrality and visibility of the author. In contrast to the assembly-line method of early American comics, in which creators were often anonymous and interchangeable, graphic novelists manifest their own authorial voice and use the medium as a means of self-expression.[4] The progressive assertion of authorial – rather than editorial – control has further been accompanied by the emergence of complete authors, who

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produce both text and art. Complete authors had actually been the norm during the early days of comic strips, at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Taylorization of comics happened later, arguably in the 1930s, when the "studio system" was established to produce enough material and satisfy the increasing demand of comic books (Hatfield 2005, 9). In the last few decades, the reinvention of comics as means of personal expression may also have contributed to the proliferation of autobiographical narratives, which constitute a significant portion of contemporary Anglo-American graphic novels. However, it would be historically inaccurate to disregard the importance of mainstream pre-graphic novel *auteurs*, as "even within the comics industry certain authors find their way to deeply individualized creations" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 18). For instance, in the early 1940s both Will Eisner and Jack Cole managed to craft their personal, highly-stylized interpretation of the superhero with, respectively, *The Spirit* (1940) and *Plastic Man* (1941). Superman's creators also gained a certain recognition during the Golden Age. Readers were familiar with the name and style of Jerome Siegel and Joe Shuster, as the two authors were credited at the beginning of the stories. [5] They were also featured in a biographical sketch, complete with colour photographs, in the first issue of *Superman* (*SM#*1, 208).

A significant difference between many early creators and contemporary graphic novelists lies in the ownership of intellectual properties. Siegel and Shuster never owned Superman, the secondary characters, and the stories they had created for DC, which they repeatedly sued to recover the rights. This still is the standard practice of the superhero comics majors, DC and Marvel, which normally retain full or partial ownership of the series crafted under their main imprints. The situation changed with the emergence of creator-owned series and graphic novels, which enabled authors to retain the rights to their own comics. In addition, several early graphic novelists followed the underground comix tradition and chose self-publishing, like Dave Sim with the highly acclaimed *Cerebus* (1977-2004). Soon, the spread of independent graphic novels and self-published comics influenced the majors:

> Since the 1970s creators were given credit for their own work […] and subsequently began to demand ownership of their material. This stands in contrast to the previous corporate mentality, and accredited authorship has brought about a new form of collaboration where both the writer and artist's input is more closely observed, if only for the purposes of ownership. (Round 2013, 30)

In the 1980s, the majors also started publishing creator-owned works, often putting them under specific imprints like Marvel's Epic line or DC's Vertigo. One of the earliest and most significant examples of mainstream creator-owned graphic novel was Frank Miller's *Ronin*, serialized between 1983 and 1984. As former DC Comics president Jenette Kahn points out, "Frank [Miller] used his cachet to make owning the copyright a condition of writing and drawing *Ronin* and in doing so helped change the balance of power between comic book companies and talent. It was a critical move" (Kahn 2014, 2).

It can be argued that most formal and thematic innovations brought about by the graphic novel had been anticipated by Anglo-American underground comix in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The underground era was characterized by the subversive appropriation of the comics medium – and even of the comic book form – by cartoonists as Robert Crumb, Gilbert Sheldon in the US, and Bryan Talbot in England. As controversial products of the counter-culture, underground comics sprang from the socio-political context of the time to react against the infantilization of comics imposed by the Code. According to Sabin, "the underground can be seen as almost as much a revolt against the Code as an expression of the counter-culture in general. It was, in a sense, an outpouring of all the 'unsound' ideas bottled-up since 1954" (1993, 171). Comix re-opened up the medium to an (exclusively) adult readership, exploring themes that would have been unthinkable in CCA-approved comics: "sex, drugs and radical politics" (36). In a climate of unprecedented aesthetic and narrative freedom, comix "established a poetic ethos of individual expression" (Hatfield 2005, 16), suggesting that comics could be used for personal and autobiographical narratives. Moreover, the underground elaborated an alternative way to distribute comics, mostly through hippies' 'head shops', while assessing the creators' right to own and earn royalties from their comics.

As in the mid-seventies comix were losing cultural and aesthetic relevance – along with the whole counter-culture –, they left a cultural void to be filled (Baetens and Frey 2015, 59). Later adult comics and graphic novels thus developed from this *milieu*, but strived to enlarge the scope and reach a wider readership:

> the new adult comics built on the innovations of the underground, and applied them to areas of fiction and non-fiction previously thought the domain of novels and film. They tended to distance themselves from the counter-cultural on sex, drugs and radical politics, and to adopt a broader approach, drawing not from this creative source like the underground, but from many. (Sabin 1993, 69–70)

Considering comix's cultural legacy, it is not surprising that the earliest work that popularized the 'graphic novel' as a notion and term stemmed in a direct way from the underground. Long retired from comics since the 1950s, Will Eisner created and published *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* in 1978, after his early works had been 'rediscovered' by the underground world.[6] As Baetens and Frey summarize, "Attending a comix's convention in New York in 1971 (New York Comic Art Convention) and meeting some of the young artists, [Eisner] was slowly inspired to rethink making comics and found contacts willing to reprint his earlier superhero-style work from the 1940s (The Spirit)" (2015, 63). A quasi-autobiographical exploration of the Bronx Jewish community in 1930s, *A Contract with God* took comix's idea of using the medium as form individual expression and developed it in a dramatic, non-satirical manner. According to Eisner, "It wasn't until the underground comix, in the seventies, that people really began doing what I considered literature. That's what propelled me back into the field. […] What they were doing was addressing real social values, for the first time" (Eisner, Miller, and Brownstein 2005, 191).

The cover of *A Contract with God*'s first paperback edition defines it as a "graphic novel". A common misconception alleges that Eisner coined the phrase for this book, or even that he outright invented the form (see for instance Rothschild 1995, xiii; Barbieri [2009] 2014, 145). Eisner himself may have contributed to the spread of the false claim, since he "apparently believed that he had coined a new term, out of desperation to market his book" (Hatfield 2005, 165). He thought that marketing a comic album as a graphic novel could have been instrumental in entering the bookstore market. As he writes in the 2004 preface to a collected edition of his works, "In 1978, encouraged by the work of the experimental graphic artists Otto Nückel, Franz Masareel and Lynd Ward, who in the 1930s published serious novels told in art without text, I attempted a major work in a similar form. In a futile effort to entice the patronage of a mainstream publisher, I called it a 'graphic novel'" (Eisner 2006, xiii–xiv). Nonetheless, the term had been circulating at least since 1964, when comics historian and publisher Richard Kyle used it in a fanzine called Capa-Alpha (Gravett 2005, 8). Comics self-proclaiming to be 'graphic novels' appeared as early as 1972, when *The Sinister House of Secret Love* #2, a 48-page comic book published by DC, defined itself as a "Graphic Novel of Gothic Horror" on its cover.[7] Throughout the 1970s, other works predated Eisner's use of the phrase. For instance, Richard Corben's 1976 *Bloodstar* – based on a short story by Robert E. Howard – claimed to be a graphic novel in the introduction and dust jacket (Baetens and Frey 2015, 70). It is also

worth considering that analogous expressions had also been in use for years in the English-speaking world. *It Rhymes with Lust*, a 132-page noir comic paperback published in 1950, defined itself as a "Picture Novel". In 1975, British artist Martin Vaughn-James used "Visual Novel" on the cover of his avant-garde experiment *The Cage*.

Even though Eisner did not invent the term nor the concept, and moreover used it in a rather inappropriate way – it is in fact a collection of short stories –,[8] *A Contract with God*'s importance for the graphic novel remains paramount. It paved the way for a decisive repositioning of comix's *ethos* within the acceptable framework of the novel. Not only did it suggested a fruitful way to present the liberating innovations of its predecessors to a general readership, but it confirmed comics' potential for adult and sophisticated narratives. From an editorial standpoint, Eisner showed that comics should not be constrained by the limitations in format, style, and content set by the comic book industry. For him, creating the graphic novel was not putting old wine in new bottles. Eisner's conscious effort to create a new way of conceiving comics situates him among the 1970s postmodern artists, who "increasingly drew on popular or mass cultural forms and genres, overlaying them with modernist and/or avant-gardist strategies" (Huyssen 1986, 197). However, despite Eisner's artistic achievement, graphic novels initially failed to enter the bookstore market. At least at the beginning, *A Contract with God*'s sales were "disappointing" (Weiner 2010, 6), and its position remained "marginal" (Bongco 2000, 137).[9] Much more successful was the adoption of the graphic novel in the direct market of comics. As Hatfield points out, "[b]y the mid-eighties, the phrase 'graphic novel' had become common currency in the comic book publishing industry, as formerly newsstand-dependant publishers redirected their product to appeal more specifically to the direct market audience" (2005, 29). In 1982, Marvel launched their own line of superhero/sci-fi graphic novels, and DC followed the next year.

Graphic novel finally managed to break into bookstores in 1986-87, when the publication of the 'Big Three' altered in a radical way the public perception of comics. The collected editions of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987) garnered great acclaim from audiences and critics alike, and sparked a general interest in adult comics (Sabin 1993, 87). Originally serialized in Spiegelman's own alternative comics magazine *Raw* since 1980, the first volume of *Maus* followed the path paved by Eisner, using comics to depict a personal and ethnically-connoted experience. It depicts a long interview by Spiegelman to his own father Vladek, who narrates

his life as Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor. *Maus* was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, as a further confirmation of its importance in the cultural landscape. Whereas *Maus* introduced the general public to rather innovative uses of the comics medium – historiography and (auto)biography –, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (hereinafter *DKR*) and *Watchmen* approached the much more familiar superhero genre. These two texts draw in fact on the tradition of sci-fi and dystopia to articulate a bold deconstruction of the archetype. At the same time, they engage with the 1980s *zeitgeist* to carry out a variously satirical exploration of Cold War paranoia. Street crime, urban plight, and the fear of a nuclear catastrophe constitute the backdrop against which the operatic superhero genre is presented in a more realistic manner. Thanks to their mature themes, but also the literary/aesthetic qualities, *DKR* and *Watchmen* opened up the superhero genre to adult, literate readers. These comics narrate a story that can be appreciated both by superhero enthusiasts and by neophytes, with little to no previous knowledge of characters and genre. As Sabin writes, "[t]he effect of *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* was thus not to revolutionize comics, as has often been supposed, but to introduce a new readership to these 'graphic novelistic' possibilities" (Sabin 1996, 165).

From a generic standpoint, *DKR and Watchmen*'s significance lies in the self-conscious revision of the formulas. These two texts constitute the most influential instances of what Geoff Klock defines as the "revisionary superhero narrative" (2002, 3), i.e. "a superhero text that, in Harold Bloom's words, is a 'strong misreading' of its poetic tradition, a comic book whose 'meaning' is found in its relationship with another comic book" (25).[10] As also visible in *Miracleman* and *V for* Vendetta, this does not mean merely overturning or rejecting the formulaic structure. These graphic novels renegotiate the tropes while engaging in a complex way with the reader's expectations. They carry out an attentive selection of narrative and aesthetic assumptions which have been accumulating through decades of continuity, and suggest radically innovative ways to approach characters and plots. As we are going to see, one of these modes of reconfiguration revolves around the inherent utopianism of the superhero, as explored within and through the textual framework of the graphic novel.

As intertextual fields, revisionary superhero comics work in the interstice between subversion and adherence to the formulaic patterns. This inbetweenness is evident, for instance, in Frank Miller's *DKR*, in which Batman is re-imagined as an aging psychopath who comes out of retirement to fight crime and chaos. As Klock writes, the graphic novel "must participate in the tradition in order to be recognized as a Batman story, but it consciously organizes that

tradition in such a way as to comment on forty-five years of Batman comic book" (2002, 28). Miller's revision exploits the readers' familiarity with the popular character, of which he foregrounds some traits while rejecting other. *DKR* repudiates the campiness associated to Adam West's 1960s TV series to embrace a hardboiled, vigilante attitude. It strengthens the links with the character's pulp origins, but it eschews the gothic outlandishness of the early tales. Extrapolating new meanings from the character's residual connotations, this careful negotiation points to the dialectical intertextuality of superhero comics. The genre in fact thrives off continuous paradigm shifts, in which new stories and incarnations of the characters are self-reflexively counterposed to previous textual dynamics. Sharing a similarity with the utopian novel proper, which has historically affirmed itself "as argument and countergument" (Jameson 2005, 2), the superhero genre thus constitute an ideal *locus* for the examination of utopia's estranging mechanisms.

The birth the revisionary superhero narrative may be better understood with reference to genre criticism. In this regard, I agree with Jenkins's claim that Klock's conceptualization can be framed within the historical typology of genres formulated by Cawelti in 1979 (Jenkins 2009, 18–19). In his study of the popular genres' development in American cinema, Cawelti suggests that

> One can almost make out a life cycle characteristic of genres as they move from an initial period of articulation and discovery, through a phase of conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, to a time when the generic patterns have become so well known that people become tired of their predictability. It is at this point that parodic and satiric treatments proliferate and new genres gradually arise. Our major traditional genres – the western, the detective story, the musical, the domestic comedy – have, after all, been around for a considerable period of time, and it may be that they have simply reached a point of creative exhaustion. (Cawelti [1979] 2012, 296)

Considering the postmodern articulation of traditional narratives, the critic individuates four major modes of generic transformation, i.e. four ways in which the conventionalized formulas have been situated in altered contexts: "humorous burlesque, evocation of nostalgia, demythologization of generic myth, and the reaffirmation of myth as myth" (295). These modes have been employed as a response "to the tendency of genres to exhaust themselves, to our growing historical awareness of modern popular culture, and finally, to the decline of the underlying mythology on which traditional genres have been based since the late nineteenth century" (296).

Adapting Cawelti's typology to comics, the revisionary superhero narrative can be seen as a third phase of generic development, emerged after the "creative exhaustion" of the Golden (1938-1950s) and Silver (1956-1970s) Ages. This is confirmed by the fact that graphic novelists have employed the four modes of generic transformation in an extensive manner (Riley 2007, 130). The most prominent is the variously nostalgic evocation of the past, which serves as a prerequisite for a narrative developing on the dialectic interaction of past and present. As Moore points out his afterword to the second issue of *Miracleman*'s American reprint, "that warm glow of nostalgia […] is probably the single biggest factor keeping us interested in this medium, whatever amount of intellectual satisfaction we manage to glean on the side" (1985, 31; see also Cremins 2014).[11] The second mode of "humorous burlesque" constitutes a minor and later strand, appearing with works like Pat Mills and Kevin O'Neill's *Marshal Law* (1987-1994). However, despite the marginality of superhero parody proper, different authors have appropriated in a non-ironic manner a central feature of burlesque, i.e. "the breaking of conventions by the intrusion of reality" (Cawelti [1979] 2012, 288). The process implies that "a situation that we are ordinarily accustomed to seeing in rather romanticized terms can be suddenly invested with a sense of reality" (*ibid.*). This aesthetic and narrative strategy characterizes many – if not every – revisionist superhero comics by Frank Miller and Alan Moore.[12] The latter claims that his approach on *Miracleman* was inspired by *Superduperman*, Harvey Kurtzman and Wally Wood's 1953 superhero comics parody published in *Mad*:

> I thought all you have to do is to take the same satirical impulse that made Harvey Kurtzman's superhero parodies so incredible, effecting and powerful, but turn that to dramatic use. The way that Harvey Kurtzman used to make his super-hero parodies so funny was to take a super-hero and then kind of apply sort of real world logic to a kind of inherently absurd super-hero situation, and that was what made his stuff so funny. (Moore and Khoury 2001, 11–12)

Adopting a greater degree of verisimilitude as formal framework, Miller's and Moore's 1980s revisions oscillate between the third and fourth mode of generic transformation. Miller leans towards the destruction and subsequent reaffirmation of the superhero myth from a right-libertarian perspective (see Croci 2016), while Moore's works are primarily oriented toward demythologization.[13] *Miracleman* and *Watchmen* "deliberately [invoke] the basic characteristic of a traditional genre in order to bring its audience to see that genre as the embodiment of an inadequate and destructive myth" (Cawelti [1979] 2012, 290).

In a Derridean gesture, these graphic novels put the superhero *sous rature* (see Barker 2004, 203–4). They use the concept to present a critique of that very concept and its symbolical implications. They affirm, only to deny it, the inadequacy of the superhero myth *vis-à-vis* the end of grand narratives: "the authority of the text is provisional, the origin is a trace; contradicting logic, we must learn to use and erase our language at the same time" (Spivak 1976, xviii). Notwithstanding Klock's and other critics' reluctance to employ the term,[14] the revisionary superhero narrative can thus be said to carry out a process of deconstruction. Superhero revisions undo the generic formulas "to expose the blind spots of texts, the unacknowledged assumptions upon which they operate" (Barker 2004, 47). Not only do these comics deconstruct the basic dichotomy between hero and villain, engendering a moral *aporia*, but they also produce a self-reflexive understanding of the genre's ideological conventions. In the process, these texts destabilize the often-contradictory meanings that have been stratifying throughout decades of continuity. As Iain Thomson writes in his analysis of *Watchmen*,

> Moore seems instinctively to know […] that one of the most powerful deconstructive strategies involves provisionally accepting an idea, thesis, position, or worldview, then working from inside it to extend it beyond its limits until it is eventually made to collapse under its own weight, like a plant forced to bear fruit too heavy for its own branches. (2007, 106)

The rise of the graphic novel, the sophistication and demarginalization of superhero comics, and the emergence of Alan Moore as genre-defining author are also to be considered with reference to a cultural-geographical aspect: in the 1980s and 1990s, a significant number of the writers and artists who innovated mainstream American comics had been born in the United Kingdom. The comic book British Invasion, as it was called, replicated the cultural shock sparked twenty years before by The Beatles' first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. As Chris Murray points out, "both instances British artists appropriated then revolutionized genres that seemed typically American, challenging audience expectations and creating waves of media interest. Also, in both cases the difference between British and American culture and politics created a space where something new and surprising could thrive" (2010, 31). The political situation of the 1980s seemed to provide the perfect background for the subversive reimagining of American popular culture. The convergence between Thatcher's and Reagan's agendas, and the personal relationship enjoyed by the two, created a symbolic transatlantic space for a subversive criticism of neoliberalism and its social consequences. For British artists,

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attacking the values associate to American superhero comics – violence, authoritarianism, individualism – was a tool to criticize the administration of the two countries.

Murray and Round (2010, 2013) identify two waves of British comics writers. The first was inaugurated by Moore, whose success with *Swamp Thing* paved the way for Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison and the lesser known Peter Milligan and Jamie Delano. In the early 1990s they were followed by the second wave of writers, which includes Mark Millar, Warren Ellis, and Garth Ennis.[15] English creators had already worked in America, as Chris Claremont, but they "had not challenged the conventions of the American mainstream in significant ways" (Murray 2010, 35). It is only with Moore, Gaiman, and the others that a distinct, revisionist tradition became recognizable. Following the example set by *Swamp Thing*, British creators specialized in the deconstructionist reinvention of defunct or marginal characters. *Black Orchid*, *The Sandman*, *Animal Man* were thus revitalized for a sophisticate audience, who welcomed these subversive revisions of the superhero archetype. The Britons' commercial success even led to the creation of an editorial enclave, DC's Vertigo imprint, which became a site of artistic and literary experimentation and "a virtual home away from home for British writers" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 88).

The British Invasion's significance lies in the capacity to employ a set of cultural and literary tools to achieve critical distance and deconstruct the myths of American culture (see Carpenter 2016, 7–8). As Grant Morrison writes,

> we arrived in our teens and twenties, in our leather jackets and Chelsea boots, with our crepe-soled brothel creepers and skinhead Ben Shermans, metal tattoos, and infected piercings. We brought to bear on the ongoing American superhero discourse the invigorating influence of alternative lifestyles, punk rock, fringe theater, and tight black jeans. (2012, 186)

From a literary standpoint, authors like Moore and Gaiman "saw themselves as writers in a long tradition of subversive imaginative production in a lineage that included Shakespeare, Blake, Wilde, Brecht, William Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, and Iain Sinclair" (Murray 2010, 44). In partaking in this multi-layered tradition, British graphic novelists have elaborated an alternate way for the legitimation and sophistication of comics. Whereas American authors have conventionally chosen historical and (auto)-biographical narratives, the British have drawn upon the tradition of fantasy and science fiction. To the historical realism of Will Eisner and

Art Spiegelman, they have counterpoised the imaginative possibilities of the estranged genres. Rather than the graphic novel, they have created the graphic romance.

3.2   Postmodernism and (Anti-)Utopia: *Miracleman*

As a work of speculative fiction and revisionary superhero narrative, Alan Moore's *Miracleman* poses a research question. It asks what would happen if comic book superheroes existed in the author's and reader's empirical environment. In other words, it sets out to investigate the behaviour and psychology of a scientifically-engineered superman living in the Thatcher-Era United Kingdom, and how the world would react to his existence. As Moore defines his own approach, he tries to "apply a bit of ordinary real world logic to a super-hero and see where that goes" (Moore and Khoury 2001, 18). The titular cognitively-plausible *übermensch* is thus used as hegemonic *novum* through which to imagine "a radically or significantly different formal framework" (Suvin 1979, 18),[16] and at the same time to articulate a misreading of superhero comics' cultural tradition. In this regard, a twofold intertextual strategy can be identified. On the one hand, the graphic novel exposes and reworks the generic conventions of superhero comics. On the other hand, it reinvigorates the genre's subterranean links with the Wellsian predecessor *WSW*, with which it most visibly shares the trope of the awakened superhero precipitating eutopia.

Carrying its basic premise to the logical conclusions, *Miracleman* historicizes, recontextualizes, and deconstructs the comic book superhero. In this tripartite process, the graphic novel uses its self-contained form to explore the dialectic of modernity and utopianism that has underpinned the archetype since its creation in 1938. First, *Miracleman* reframes the genre's structural ambiguities and literary sources within postmodernity, analysing them through pastiche and nostalgia. It dramatizes the ontological incompatibility between the classic comics' moral dichotomies and the postmodern "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard [1979] 1984, xxiv). As Moore asks in the series' original proposal, "How does the naive, morally black-and-white Marvelman fit in with the tangled mess that is the Nineteen-Eighties?" (2001, 28). Secondly, the graphic novel fulfils the superhero's utopian potential, bringing narrative closure to comics' open-endedness. As Paul Atkinson points out, "Moore deliberately experimented with the temporal conventions of serialized comic books by inserting the

characters in a universe not defined by the rules of serial continuity" (2009, 52). Freed from the need of ongoing serialization, the character is thus finally able to create a better world. However, instead of merely defetishizing eutopia as the natural outcome of the superheroic activity, Moore opens the possibility of an anti-utopian critique.[17] Through a mechanism of self-delegitimization, *Miracleman* eventually allows for a "rejection of both Utopia and the historical changes it informs and produce" (Moylan 2000b, 134).

Before investigating *Miracleman*'s exploration of superheroism, the character's complex publication history must be considered.[18] Its origins lie in *Captain Marvel*, a popular American superhero comics series created in 1939 by C. C. Beck and Bill Parker. Published by Fawcett comics, Captain Marvel was clearly inspired by *Superman*, of which he represented a childish and fantasy surrogate. His civil alter ego is a young orphan paperboy called Billy Batson, who has received from a wizard the power of transforming into an adult superhuman by uttering the magic word "Shazam!". According to Morrison, "If Superman was Science Fiction, and Batman was Crime, Captain Marvel planted his flag in the wider territory of pure Fantasy" (2012, 31). Since the mid-1940s, black-and-white reprints of Captain Marvel had been serialized in the United Kingdom by small publisher L. Miller & Son.[19] In 1953, *Captain Marvel* ceased publication in the US after a copyright infringement lawsuit, as it was determined to be a Superman rip-off. Its British publisher hence asked cartoonist Mick Anglo to replace it with a slightly different imitation called *Marvelman*, whose publication started in 1954 and continued until 1963. Only few elements were changed: Billy Batson was renamed Michael Moran, 'Shazam!' became 'Kimota!' ('atomic' spelled backwards), the costume lost its cape, the female sidekick Mary Marvel was replaced by another young boy, and the wizard was turned into a 'recluse Astro-Scientist', signalling a shift towards sci-fi. As James Chapman points out, *Marvelman* can be deemed as "the first British superhero to achieve any sustained popularity" (2011, 175). It introduced a typical American archetype to a country in which "there was no tradition of costumed characters" (Sabin 1993, 28). In 1982, *Marvelman* was revived by Alan Moore and Garry Leach in the British comics anthology *Warrior*, where it was serialized until 1984. After the magazine's demise, the series continued in the US as comic book published by Eclipse Comics, which decided to rename the character Miracleman to avoid legal issues with Marvel.[20] In 1989, Moore concluded his story arc and offered Neil Gaiman to continue the series (Khoury 2001, 118). Only eight chapter written by Gaiman had been serialized when Eclipse went bankrupt, leaving the graphic novel incomplete.[21] Even from this

brief summary, it can be seen that Moore incorporated the publishing vicissitudes into the character's fictional biography. The hiatus between 1963 and 1982 in fact corresponds to Moran's amnesia and abandonment of his superhero persona.

Miracleman's publication history, intertextuality, and thematic articulation are addressed in the eleven-page prologue that opens the first volume of the collected edition. First appeared the American reprint's opening issue, "The Invaders from the Future" is actually a 1956 *Marvelman* episode by Mick Anglo and Don Lawrence, with major alterations in the dialogue and captions plus a final extra page.[22] Besides (re-)introducing a forgotten character to 1980s readers, this apparently naïve short story foreshadows several elements of Moore's story arc. Thanks to the textual interpolations, it serves as a microcosm for the following narrative and aesthetic revision. It recounts the invasion of the "Science Gestapo", an army of time-travelling "Storm Troopers" from the future year 1981 who has landed on Cornwall to "conquer the world of yesterday" (*DF*, 5).[23] To thwart their villainous attempt, Miracleman must travel to 1981 and "halt the invasion from the future before it's even begun!" (13). Miracleman thus frees the future – and his own present – from the Science Gestapo, so that the 1981 society "can be the utopia it was meant to be!" (14).

According to Atkinson, "The embedded references to the earlier manifestations of the superhero function as a means of maintaining structural continuity, critiquing superhero utopianism and playing with the postmodern nostalgia for past images stripped of their historicity" (2009, 49). This latter aspect is evoked by the postmodern appropriation of the classic tale, which is edited to achieve a defamiliarizing effect. As a hybrid, textual-visual pastiche, "The Invaders from the Future" imitates and simultaneously disavows the original. It serves as the thesis against which the series will argue, but it also affirms the inaccessibility of that thesis. The past that revisionist comics are expected to subvert can only be approached and evoked "through stylistic connotation" (Jameson 1991, 19). As an exercise in *différance*, the appropriation suggests the undecidability of meaning created through juxtaposition, which also constitutes one the fundamental signifying practices of the comics medium. However, this does not mean that the *Miracleman* – or its microcosmic prologue – uncritically surrenders to the "random cannibalization of the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (18). The conclusive zoom into Miracleman's eye dispels the Silver Age silliness depicted moments before, and opens to a (literally) close reading of the character's and genre's antinomies.

In considering *Miracleman*'s continuity, the prologue also reinstates the superhero within the tradition of Wells's scientific romance.[24] The basic premise of 'scientific' invaders from the future recalls in fact *WWs*, in which the mechanized Martians are depicted as possible evolution of man. Moreover, the idea of a British *übermensch* travelling to a hyper-technological future to turn it into an eutopia alludes to *WSW*, which constitutes one of the graphic novel's narrative models. This is confirmed by the opening pages of *Miracleman*'s first chapter, entitled "A Dream of Flying", in which we see Moran dreaming of his long-forgotten alter-ego (*DF*, 16–17). Like Graham, he is a sleeper who dreams of "a vanished age" (*WSW*, 465). The main difference between the two characters lies in the accessibility of that very past. Whereas Graham can effectively employ his "memory of an age that hope" (*ibid*.) as a blueprint for his eutopian project, Moran here experiences a series of confusing images that not only resist interpretation, but cause him headaches. His memories come in the guise of oneiric fragments, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing: "Why can't I figure out what it means? Recurring dreams must mean something. If only I could remember that damn word" (*DF*, 18).

Considering *Miracleman* self-referential intertextuality, the very first pages also display a decisive shift in the representational strategies. Garry Leach's hyperrealist artistic style constitutes in fact a major break with Anglo's cartoonish *Marvelman*, seen few pages before in the prologue. The stylistic discontinuity suggests that the monochrome and childish fantasy of 1950s comics has been replaced by a complex and morally ambiguous reality. Leach's (and the following *Miracleman* artists') realistic mode produces a distancing effect.[25] As McCloud argues, the cartoonish style (such as *Marvelman*'s) stimulates readerly identification, for "The cartoon is vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled… an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm" (1994, 36). By contrast, a more realistic style objectifies the characters, "emphasizing their 'otherness' from the reader" (44). In *Miracleman*, this alterity creates critical distance and prevents a facile identification with the characters. It thus produces the aesthetic conditions for the cognitive estrangement of science fiction.

The construction of different formal framework begins when Moran fortuitously remembers that "damn word" that transforms him into Miracleman (*DF*, 20). Like Graham in the year 2100, he awakens. This *anagnorisis* triggers a process of self-discovery and historicization that can be seen as a form of "cognitive mapping". Jameson defines it as "a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new

heightened sense of its place in the global system" (1991, 54). A "modernist strategy" (409) in a postmodern world (see also Brooker 1996, 86–102), it enables "a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (51). Cognitive mapping therefore functions as "a demystifying countermeasure to the debilitating operations of ideology" (Burling 2009, 239). This mechanism dialectically relates to *Miracleman*'s twofold generic affiliation. On the one hand, the strategy redresses the lack of historicity of superhero comics, permitting the seriation of narrative events. The character can thus attempt to map its own ontological status, historical reality, and social position. On the other hand, cognitive mapping is transcoded into the epistemological configuration of the scientific romance, in which "theories [are] formulated and discarded as the evidence is pieced together, until the real truth appears" (Draper 1987, 43). The re-creation of a 'heightened sense place' thus proceeds through experimental stages and paradigmatic revisions.

Miracleman's cognitive mapping is carried out in three phases, through which Moore deconstructs the superhero genre. Supported by his newly-rediscovered memories, Moran's initially concludes that he had been a superhero in the 1950s – i.e. what we know as Anglo's *Marvelman* –, and he forgot it because of a traumatic experience in 1963.[26] However, this assumption appears problematic for no one seems to recall the existence of his former persona. When he narrates his backstory to his wife Liz, she tells him, "Mike, if there had really been a Miracleman in the fifties, wouldn't I have heard about him???". He hence speculates that "Maybe they hushed it up or something" (*DF*, 28). Moore employs the entire dialogue as a metacommentary on the genre's inherent absurdities, and the difficulties in adapting them to a realistic scenario:

> L: I'm sorry Mike… but that's such a bloody stupid story! Can't you see it? An "Astro Physicist" pops up and tells you the "key harmonic of the universe"… which just happens to turn you into a muscleman in a blue leotard? I'm sorry Mike, I really am. But that's just so stupid!
> M: I suppose you are right. Actually, saying it out like that, it does sound… well… pretty unlikely. I never really thought about it before. […] This may, damn it… this does sound silly in 1982, but in the fifties it made perfect sense. This how I remember it. This is how it happened. (26–27)

The first stage of cognitive mapping also addresses the iterative scheme of open-ended comics, in which "each event takes up again from a sort of virtual beginning, ignoring where

the preceding event left off" (Eco 1972, 19). Reminiscing about his archenemy Doctor Gargunza, Miracleman comments that "Time and time again we thwarted his insane plans and jailed him. But somehow he always came back… and yet he never did anything really evil… it was almost as if we were all playing a game. A game which neither took entirely seriously" (*DF*, 27). The background panels depict scenes of *Marvelman*'s cartoonish violence, in which conflict is/was always resolved without bloodshed. This suggests that *Miracleman* aims to undermine two generic assumptions linked to open-ended seriality: the lack of psychological and material consequences, and the chronic excision of responsibilities. Even though superheroes and supervillains traditionally engage in destructive behaviours, bodies and cities (almost) never bear the traces of conflict. In an interview, Moore laments that the Comics Code has contributed to mystify superheroes' inherent violence, and that "any realistic approach to conflict like that would probably entail a significant amount of lost human life" (Moore and Khoury 2001, 18). This latter idea is reflected in *Miracleman*, in which the physical signs of violence are depicted in great detail (see for instance the whole fight scene in *DF* 36–46). The demystification of superheroes' destructiveness culminates in the third story arc, *Olympus*. Here, the final confrontation between Miracleman and his former sidekick turned evil, Kid Miracleman, razes London to the ground (88–89).[27]

Moran's cognitive mapping enters the second stage as he gathers further information about his past. He discovers that his superheroic alter-ego is a genetically-enhanced clone that exists in a "infra-space", and that replaces him when he utters the word "Kimota!". The clone's "brain and body are almost perfectly evolved, lending it a wide range of extra-human abilities. It does not, however, possess its own independent consciousness" (*DF*, 80). In providing a scientific rationale for the superhero's powers, Moore critically reframes the character as a product of British (post-)imperial nostalgia. It is in fact revealed that Miracleman and his two protégés gained their powers in 1954 "as a result of an experiment termed Project Zarathustra, carried out by a branch of air force intelligence known as the Spookshow" (*DF*, 65). These supermen were meant to provide the United Kingdom with a weapon to rival and possibly surpass the post-WW2 superpowers:

> while America currently possesses the atomic bomb and Russia and China will shortly be similarly endowed, Britain as yet has no such capability. It is our belief that the tactical potential of Project Zarathustra will make all conventional weaponry, including the A-Bomb, as obsolete as the slingshot. (81)

This implies that Miracleman/Marvelman is not merely a Captain America-like power-fantasy underpinned by a "racialized dialectic of legitimate and deviant bodies" (Wasielewski 2009, 65). The character also reflects the culturally- and historically-situated desire of an Anglo-Saxon blonde *übermensch* defending the Empire – of what remains of it – from its inner and outer enemies. Much like Wells's Time Traveller, Moran's alter ego serves as the "imaginary embodiment" of "the historical experience of British world dominance and the accompanying habituation to imperial pre-eminence" (Gilroy 2004, 109). It is not a chance that he is counterpoised to two racially-coded foils. Throughout the first two volumes, Miracleman is aided by a former Spookshow henchman called Evelyn Cream, a black man who was "Educated at Rugby" and "Trained at Sandhursts", considers himself to be "practically white", and (yet) is haunted by the fear of "[going] native" (*DF*, 71) (see Darius 2013). The other foil is Doctor Gargunza, the leader of Project Zarathustra and thus symbolical father to the Miracleman family. Born in Mexico, Gargunza immigrated to Brazil after Porfirio Díaz's fall from power in 1911. He then moved to Nazi Germany, where "was given a position within the Reich, researching genetics amongst other things" (*RKS*, 38), and finally he defected to the United Kingdom. There, the scientist reverse-engineered the technology to create Miracleman from a dead alien creature and its spacecraft that crashed in Wiltshire in 1948 – the same year in which the Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury. Moore thus uses Gargunza's and the alien visitor's otherness to give an ironic twist to Miracleman's backstory. The Aryan *übermensch* is in fact born out of a "freaking dwarf" (*DF*, 27) from Mexico, and a monstrous alien "refusing to conform to any biological theory that I could image" (*RKS*, 43). The defender of Britishness is created by those who have violated the borders and the racial purity of the Empire.

The imperial nostalgia is not the sole aspect of Miracleman's fictional ontology scrutinized during the second phase of cognitive mapping. Moore also uses the character to examine in a self-referential manner the making of history and its relationship with fiction in the postmodern age. The revision of the superhero as a modern construct comes thus to symbolize the subject's reconfiguration in late capitalism. When Miracleman discovers to be a genetically-enhanced clone, he also finds out that the recovered memories of his superheroic past – i.e. what we know as Anglo's *Marvelman* – are part of a hallucinatory dream world fed for years into his unconscious mind. The "entirely artificial reality" is constructed "to fully control the thought processes and motivations of these potentially catastrophic creatures" (*DF*, 83). Thanks to this diegetic explanation, Moore accounts for *Marvelman*'s outlandishness: "The

dream world which we have constructed is one in which a pseudo-rational explanation exists for these beings and their abhuman abilities. It is a juvenile but effective scenario in which the creatures believe that they have made into 'super-heroes' by a semi-mystical being named 'Guntag Borghelm'" (*ibid.*). Later on, Gargunza even reveals that the inspiration for Miracleman's dream world was drawn from a superhero comic book, "a flimsy, black-and-white children's paper, left there by some semi-literate engineer" (*RKS*, 45). The panel depicts a copy of *Captain Marvel*, the American series that inspired Anglo's 1950s *Marvelman* (see Atkinson 2009, 49).

In exploring the relationship between the character and his former incarnations, the graphic novel dramatizes a constitutive feature of postmodernism: the idea that "history is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization" (Jameson 1981, 67). Moran's – and by extension, the reader's – past becomes a chasm of fictional memory, a *mise en abyme* of popular culture within the nexus of science fiction.[28] Representation thus gives way to simulation. Once believed to be "the reflection of a basic reality", Moran's memory instead "bears no relation to any reality whatever" and become "pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1988, 170). The hyperreal space fosters the longing for a forgotten past, – be it children's comics, or the glory of the British Empire. This form of nostalgia triggers "a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity" (171).

I would argue that *Miracleman*'s intertextual and self-referential scrutiny of the relationship between historical fact and fiction qualifies it as historiographic metafiction.[29] Not only the graphic novel "works *within* conventions in order to subvert them" (Hutcheon 1988, 5), but it also "[enacts] the problematic nature of the relation of writing history to narrativization and, thus, to fictionalization, thereby raising the same questions about the cognitive status of historical knowledge" (93). *Miracleman* employs the formal specificity of the comics medium to explore the graphic novel's potential for historiographic metafiction. The entire third volume is characterized by the split between the embedded narrator – "the instance that utters the text" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 146) – and the focalizer, i.e. "the instance that sees or filters the image" (*ibid.*). Miracleman's voice-over, in coloured captions, provides in fact retrospective commentary on the events represented in the panels. From his privileged position in the future year 1987, he endows what we see and thus perceive as 'true' with additional and problematic meanings. In describing the final confrontation with Kid Miracleman, he argues that "The battle,

far too big to be contained by simple facts, has spawned so many different legends, each with its own adherents; as valid if not more so, as the truth" (*Olympus*, 77). The following two pages employ a radically different art-style to depict a series of events, some of which have actually been represented in the graphic novel's previous chapters. Miracleman's voice-over questions the truth-value of these events: "In one such story… true or false, who knows?... We are transported by the Warpsmith's power to silence, on the seabed, where he's magically arranged equipment borrowed from his awesome race, that will transmit a living thing through time" (78; the original sequence is in *DF*, 91–100).

As a paradoxical hybrid of myth and romance (see Chapter 2.5), the superhero genre constitutes a perfect specimen for studying the postmodern reconfigurations of history and fiction. Postmodernism, in returns, provides the genre with the theoretical and cultural tools for a dialectical negotiation of its operating assumptions. The point is that *Miracleman* problematizes the textualization of reality not to affirm the inaccessibility of history, but to carry out a critical re-historicization of superheroes. Nostalgia and pastiche are here remoulded as powerful instruments for historicity, i.e. "a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes is and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective" (Jameson 1991, 284). In Jamesonian terms, the graphic novel approaches postmodernism in a "homeopathic" way, as it "[works] at dissolving the pastiche by using all the instruments of pastiche itself, [and reconquers] some genuine historical sense by using the instruments of what I have called substitutes for history" (Jameson in Stephanson 1987, 42). When Miracleman 'awakens' and starts reconstructing his past, he relinquishes the oneiric climate of superhero comics. The character "is no longer suspended in a world where time is limited to narrative events, which can be endlessly cycled and repeated through the loop series, but has entered a world where time is irreversible and progressive" (Atkinson 2009, 49). We can clearly see it in the third volume, which oscillates between Miracleman's present and the past of his intradiegetic narration. Offering a painstaking seriation of events, it opens with "1987. The July morning: big, hot empty, not quite broken" (5), and continues with "After creation came a time when young gods fought their Titan fathers… The time was November 1982; the place, less certain" (7).

The re-historicization of the superhero and the self-containedness of the graphic novel provide the formal conditions for the ideation of an alternative historical hypothesis, i.e. utopia. Unencumbered by the trappings of open-ended serialization, the character is thus able to

accomplish the task initiated by Graham in *WSW*. In *Miracleman*, the creation of a eutopian society begins with Moran's shift from reactivity to proactivity, which constitutes a major violation of the genre's formulas (see Coogan 2006, 110–15). It happens when he decides to kill Kid Miracleman's alter ego, a child named Johnny Bates, at the end of their catastrophic confrontation. Bates is theoretically innocent, and yet Miracleman decides to eliminate him to prevent him to transform again into the wicked Kid Miracleman (*Olympus*, 86–87). This act problematizes in a decisive way the ethical stance of the superhero. As Atkinson suggests, "There are no longer the moral absolutes of the Golden Age of comics, and instead morality is based on harsh consequentialism, where Miracleman is prepared to kill an innocent child for the good of the world" (2009, 53). It is worth noting that the execution of Johnny Bates mirrors another ritual killing happened few pages before, when Moran decides to 'commit suicide' by forsaking his civil identity (*Olympus*, 62–63).[30] The event can be said to open the third phase of Miracleman's cognitive mapping. He no longer must reconstruct his past, for he is ready to create his – and the world's – future. This new performativity is emphasized by the frame narrative that literally surrounds the pages of the third chapter. Here, we see Miracleman dancing in space and poetically describing the events depicted by the inner panels:[31] "The tempo drops, assumes a more funereal pace, full of loss and loneliness. I'm dancing. Dancing on my own" (60).

A substantial portion of *Olympus* is devoted the description of Miracleman's world-wide eutopia. Created by the superhero and his newly-found companion Miraclewoman after the destruction of London,[32] this ideal society is depicted in an ambiguous manner. To an extent, it appears to be a modern, scientific utopia. It has "windmill forests that wring electricity from clear skies" (20), and "computer and telecommunication webs make earth a place where distance is irrelevant" (38). Through futuristic technology, the ozone layer has been restored, the African deserts "regreened" (101), and crime gradually eliminated (102). The dead are resurrected as androids that mimic their original personality (111). However, Miracleman's world also evokes pre-modern "utopias of sensual gratification", characterized by "simplicity, unity, security, immortality or an easy death, unity with God or the gods, abundance without labor, and no enmity between homo sapiens and the other animals. If women are included (which they usually are not) and get pregnant, they give birth without pain" (Sargent 1994, 10). We are in fact told that people do no longer have to work, for "everything is free" and money has been abolished (*Olympus*, 102). Gargunza's vicious Miracledog has been tamed, and no

longer constitutes a threat to humanity (113). Women give birth to genetically-enhanced super babies with much greater "comfort" than before (115). Most significantly, Miracleman and his inner circle of superpowered associates are worshipped as god-kings: "Oh, earth, look up, and see your gods at celebration. See the things that frightened you when you were in your caves; the things you named and dedicated idols to; the things you rendered up burnt offerings to appease" (120). The pantheon resides in the eponymous Olympus, a gargantuan palace (250 km²) built on the ruins of London, with "triumphant soaring lines that dwarfed the gigantism of the Reich's Berlin; a vast extravagance of decoration that would shame Versailles or Babylon the great" (104). People can come to the Olympus and pray for 'miracles': "Sometimes, toy citizens clamber up here asking favours; this disease needs curing, that river moving. Sometimes I say yes" (5). In all its baroque magnificence, the palace can be seen as a visual metaphor for the entire graphic novel. The grandiose construction rises from the ashes of the superhero to bring about its apotheosis. A dead and sterile ground becomes a daring, modernist exploit. As "architects of dreams" (100), Moore and Miracleman restructure the influence-laden tradition of superhero comics into a self-referential utopian edifice, which "leaves readers with not just a conclusion to its own story but with the end of the superhero genre" (Atkinson 2009, 60).

The religious quality of Miracleman's eutopia suggest a return to an ahistorical dimension. Apparently eradicated by cognitive mapping and homeopathic postmodernism, the mythical facet of superheroes comes back with a vengeance: "we breathed mythology, spat fables, sweated legends, and were godlings of Olympus" (104). It is evident that Miracleman conceives his utopia in terms of a timeless, imagined past. He describes the Olympus as "no less than Albion, than Camelot fulfilled" (*Olympus*, 90). His main model, though, seem to be the superhero comics that originally informed his consciousness:

> I dream a world of heroes and exciting clothes, hoods cut away to show the hair or leotards made out of flags. I dream insignia, dream lightning flashes, planets, letters, stars; of bob-cut women wearing red stilettos, ice-blue half-length capes; of men in dominos, transparent blouses, slashing elegance of line in every wrinkle, every crease. I dream names like Doctor Satellite, Lady October, Johnny Analogue. I dream a world where everyone has sidekicks and caves to keep their eerie souvenirs. (92)

He likens his own technomythical utopia to "The Invaders from the Future", *Marvelman*'s 1956 story which opens the graphic novel: "Futurity invades our here-and-now, erecting

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beachheads in our language, in our architecture, 'til at last we are under occupation, and tomorrow's coups depose the rule of history" (94). Miracleman's utopia is an attempt to recreate a past that never existed. He desires a perennial Silver Age, "free from moral complications" (100), in which he would not have to choose between killing his former sidekick or sparing his life. To achieve this comic book fantasy, Moran thus decides to implement a two-phase eugenics programme. The first stage entails "shipping frozen sperm to women who desired to rear a deity" (110). The second is "to let human volunteers receive a version of Gargunza's process, growing them alternate superhuman bodies of their own" (115). The panel depicts a shop window displaying superhero costumes, and advertising the possibility of "[Unleashing] your super human potential" (*ibid.*). As a political project, Miracleman's mythological discourse thus attempts to reify utopia, turning it into a Morean, timeless entity. The long-awaited realization of the modernist – or even Victorian – dream of a better society seems to reinstate the immobilizing metaphysics of open-ended superhero comics. In Robert Browning's words, "God's in His heaven – all's right with the world".

However, the graphic novel ends with a final destabilization, which dehypostatizes utopia and reactivates the dialectical spiral. Producing an anti-utopian delegimitation of the utopian narrative, Miracleman puts into question his own actions. At least two occurrences can be identified. The first takes place when a newspaper accuses him and his cohort of "interfering with human destiny and taking away free will" (100). His superhero associate Firedrake comments, "Bullshit. You see some little kid just about to drink Clorox, you gonna take away his free will or he ain't gonna get no destiny". Visibly upset, Miracleman argues, "I don't know. The issue of human free will is more complex than that…", only to be reassured by Miraclewoman, "Michael, I don't know why you persist in seeing the stat of being human as something special. Did humans ask such agonized questions about the free will of cows, or the destiny of fish?" (*ibid.*). The second occurrence is linked to the eugenics programme. When Moran goes to his neglected wife Elizabeth and asks her to become a superhuman, she declines the offer. He tells her, "You don't understand what you are turning down…", and she replies "… and you have forgotten what you are asking me to give up" (116). Moran appears unable to understand his wife's reasons, but he is disturbed by her refusal. Her unwillingness to partake in the utopian project produces in fact a powerful estranging effect, as she shows Miracleman and the reader an alternative to the totalizing assumptions of utopia. At the very end of the graphic novel, the superhero hence starts to harbour doubts about his actions. The final image

depicts him alone, on the roof of Olympus, in a pensive attitude: "It's been five years since my rebirth. I come here quite a lot these days. Sometimes, I think of Liz. Sometimes I wonder why she turned my offer down; wonder why anyone should not wish to be perfect in a perfect world. Sometimes, I wonder why that bothers me, and sometimes... sometimes I just wonder" (124–25).

Miracleman's self-doubts reveal the problematic implications of his utopian project. First of all, they seem to confirm the much-debated association between utopianism and totalitarianism, i.e. the anti-utopian argument that "a deliberately constructed society of this sort can only be maintained by the continual use of force" (Sargent 1994, 24). The new world order can function only if the superhero forcibly removes all nuclear and bacteriological weapons (*Olympus*, 98–99), and restructures the economy with no political or democratic consultation (97, 102). Miracleman takes the early Superman's – and, by extent, the superhero archetype's – inherent authoritarianism to a global scale. His rule is, as Moore defines it, an "incredible benign dictatorship" (Moore and Khoury 2001, 20). In the second place, the incident with Elizabeth hints at the moral complexities of positive eugenics as a form of bio-power.[33] Apart from the ethical concerns about positive eugenics *per se*, the voluntariness constitutes a major issue with Miracleman's project. The genetic enhancement of part of the population in fact institutionalizes a dichotomic opposition between legitimate superhuman bodies and non-normative *untermenschen*. Ideated to overcome one of the greatest obstacles to the realization of the ideal society – people's inherent flaws –, this eugenic programme is bound to create the genetic basis for racial hierarchy. Finally, Miracleman's self-doubts call into question one of the central tenets of the superhero genre, i.e. "that the possession of superpowers or extraordinary abilities is enough to qualify one to make and act upon an individualized interpretation of justice" (Coogan 2006, 112). This implies that superheroes are always expected to tell right from wrong, and to act in accordance. The graphic novel's final sequence casts a shadow over the entire narrative, and develop an anti-utopian critique of superheroic proactivity. In problematizing the superhero's ethical stance, Moore thus carries out a "restless skeptical exploration of the very articles of faith on which utopias themselves are built" (Huntington 1982, 124).

Through the appropriation and revision of generic formulas, *Miracleman* comments upon the popular tradition of superhero comics, with all their cultural sources and symbolic implications. The archetype is thus deconstructed and historicized, both in its relationship with

modernity and British imperial culture. At the same time, the postmodern reconfiguration of the superhero reframes its inherently ambiguous utopianism, using it as an instrument to scrutinize the implications of utopia. The antinomic configurations of superhero comics, postmodernity, and utopianism are thus eroded from within, in a centrifugal process which continuously incorporates and reproduces the elements of its own delegitimation. At the end, the contradictions cannot be resolved. Like the titular character, we are left on the roof of a magnificent and ambiguous utopian fable, with a series of ethical concerns that will never be cleared up. In Moore's words, "[*Miracleman*] is much more of a fantasy than *Watchmen*, but again a sort of very ambiguous utopia. *Miracleman* seems very benign, very decent, but some questions remain" (in Sharrett [1988] 2012, 57).

3.3   Critical Dystopia and *Détournement*: *V for Vendetta*

Whereas *Miracleman* depicts an ambiguous eutopia as a result of the superhero's actions, Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* ([1990] 2005, hereinafter *VfV*) posits a dystopian society as the formal framework and narrative starting point.[34] Set in the 'future' year of 1997, the graphic novel extrapolates a *Nineteen Eighty-Four*-inspired totalitarian state from the political and social context of 1980s Britain. Defined by Moore "the most direct expression of my political feelings at the time" (Moore and Khoury 2001, 13), it filters "the anxieties of some on the left as to the trajectory of Thatcherism" (Gray 2010, 36) through the lens of dystopian science-fiction. However, *VfV* differs from twentieth-century classic dystopias (most notably Huxley's and Orwell's) inasmuch as it suggests an effective praxis for counter-hegemonic resistance through its titular character, the anarcho-terrorist superhero V. In this regard, the graphic novel can be read as a critical dystopia,[35] which Sargent describes as

> a non-existent society described in considerable detain and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia. (2001, 222)

Drawing on the tradition inaugurated by Wells's *WSW*, *VfV* hence produces the superhero as "eutopian enclave". The character re-negotiates the narrative and ideological conflict

between utopia and anti-utopia, opening the possibility of eutopian subversion within and against the imaginative framework of dystopia.

VfV's hybridization of dystopian fiction and superhero comics can be seen as a form of "genre blurring", which Baccolini and Moylan identify as one of the defining features of critical dystopias: "By self-reflexively borrowing specific conventions from other genres, critical dystopias more often blur the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand its creative potential for critical expression" (2003b, 7). V is both a typically dystopian "alienated character" refusing "the dominant society" (Moylan 2000b, 147) *and* a comic book superhero (see Di Liddo 2009, 40; Carpenter 2016, 27). He wears a caped costume, with the iconic Guy Fawkes mask; he possesses superhuman abilities, gained as a result of a government experiment; he lives in a secret hideout, the Shadow Gallery; he is aided by a sidekick, Evey, who somehow recalls the female companions of classic utopian romances (see Porta 1997, 18; J. Greenblatt 2009). The first meeting between V and Evey adheres to and simultaneously revises the conventions of superhero comics. She is a sixteen-year-old aspirant prostitute who, on her first night out, encounters agents of the Finger, the military police. The Fingermen decide to rape and then kill her, but they are interrupted and slain by a mysterious figure, V (*VfV*, 10–13). We are thus presented with a (stereo)typical damsel in distress being saved by a masked avenger. As even Evey acknowledges, "You… you rescued me! Like in a story! I don't believe it" (*VfV*, 13). However, Moore and Lloyd insert a series of subversive traits that problematize the generic affiliation. V is not depicted as a hypermasculine crusader *à la* Batman, but rather as a queer, operatic, "gender-norm-violating public figure" (Frasure 2012, 8). His first words are a quotation from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as an intertextual link which suggests thematic parallelism and prefigures narrative developments:

> The multiplying villainies of nature do swarm upon him. And Fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling, showed like a rebel's whore. But all's too weak; For brave Macbeth... well he deserves that name... disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel, which smoked with bloody execution, like valour's minion, carved out his passage... till he faced the slave; which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him. (11–12).[36]

V then introduces himself to Evey as "The king of the twentieth century. I'm the bogeyman. The villain… The black sheep of the family" (13), and proceeds to exploding the House of Parliament. Here, the choice of the world "villain" bears a particular significance. It indicates the absence of moral dichotomies, pointing to the character's ambiguous status as

terrorist-hero. As Moore claims, "one of the most interesting things about [*VfV*] was that morally there was nothing *but* gray. We were asking the reader to consider some interesting questions. Is it all right for this character to kill people indiscriminately just because he is the hero?" (in Khoury 2003, 75). Considering superhero comics' generic formula, "villain" also hints at V's proactive utopianism. Proactivity is in fact normally associated to opponents, who serve as transformative agents. Heroes, by contrast, are reactionary forces, and strive to preserve the status quo (see Chapter 2.5). As in *Miracleman*, the main character is hence willing to disregard the conventions of the genre, and to bring the archetype's inherent – but flawed – utopianism to its logical conclusion.

I would argue that the hybridization of dystopian fiction and superhero comics within the narrative patterns of critical dystopia leads to the creation of second, counterhegemonic *novum*.[37] In *VfV*, we witness the rise of another "totalizing phenomenon or relationship" which does not (only) deviate "from the author's and implied readers's norm of reality" (Suvin 1979, 64), but (also) from the diegetic "norm of reality" engendered by the primary *novum*. A tripartite pyramidal structure can be thus conceptualized. At the base, we have the reader's and author's empirical reality (which I shall call R). One step above, there is the first *novum* (N1), i.e. the dystopian fictional setting modelled upon historical circumstances and literary models. N1 is surmounted by the second *novum* (N2), the character V, serving as a "commanding new historical idea-form" (Moylan 2000b, 125). As utopian agent, it produces an historical hypothesis that is radically different from R and N1. Narrative cohesion between R, N1, and N2 is maintained by a net of intertextual figures – allusions, quotations, references –, which are ultimately repurposed as a means of cultural and political resistance.

To depict future Britain as a fascist, totalitarian state, N1 draws historical and literary elements from R. In this regard, *VfV*'s historical dimension can be said to constitute, to use Wells's words, "an exaggeration of contemporary tendencies" ([1934] 1984, 645). The graphic novel reflects the socio-political context of the 1980s "to articulate a critique of a futuristically estranged Thatcherism and allegorize a dynamic contrast between fascism and anarchism" (Gray 2010, 32). Moore's own feeling towards the Thatcher government are best explained by his introduction in the first issue of *VfV*'s American reprint:

> Naiveté can […] be detected in my supposition that it would take something as melodramatic as a near-miss nuclear conflict to nudge England towards fascism. […]
> It's 1988 now. Margaret Thatcher is entering her third term of office and talking confidently of an unbroken Conservative leadership well into the next century. My youngest daughter

is seven and the tabloid press are circulating the idea of concentration camps for persons with AIDS. The new riot police wear black visors, as do their horses, and their vans have rotating video cameras mounted on top. The government has expressed a desire to eradicate homosexuality, even as an abstract concept, and one can only speculate as to which minority will be the next legislated against. I'm thinking of taking my family and getting out of this country soon, sometime over the next couple of years. It's cold and it's mean spirited and I don't like it here anymore. (Moore [1988] 2005, 6)

In the graphic novel, the 1980s are referred to as a period of "recession" (*VfV*, 26). The situation worsens in 1988, when a thermonuclear war between the URSS and the US obliterates Africa and continental Europe, and radically alters the climate. As Evey remembers, "There was no food, and the sewers were flooded and everybody got sick. […] That how it was for four years… Not enough food, not enough money. Some of the older girls made money going with men" (28). These features reflect the growing economic inequality and "widespread poverty" (Seldon and Collings 2000, 84) of the Thatcher decade: "as government and union protection was dismantled, the bottom fifth of the workers actually became worse off compared to the rest of the workers than they had been a century earlier" (Hobsbawm 1994, 308). The socio-political unrest of those years – the Brixton riots, the miners' strike – is mirrored in the post-apocalyptic scenario which preludes the rise of the fascist dictatorship: "There were riots, and people with guns. Nobody knew what was going on" (*VfV*, 28). After the putsch, the Norsefire strengthens its power through the systematic excision of otherness: "They got things under control. But then they started taking people away… all the black people and the Pakistanis… White people too. All the radicals and […] the homosexuals" (*ibid.*). As government radio broadcaster Lewis Prothero points out, "We had to do what we did. All the darkies, the Nancy boys and the beatniks… It was us or them" (33). Norsefire's racial policies and chauvinism – the government motto is "England Prevail" – allude to Thatcher's Britain, "profoundly and viscerally nationalist and distrustful of the outside world" (Hobsbawm 1994, 412). One year before the Falkland War, the conservative government abolished birthright citizenship (British Nationality Act 1981). In 1987, it also passed the infamous Clause 28, which prevented local authorities from promoting homosexuality and "the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship".[38]

In *VfV*, the socio-political context of the 1980s is framed within the formulas of dystopian science fiction. Moore is aware of the analogical possibilities of the genre, which he employs to achieve a distancing effect: "As with most of the future worlds in science fiction you are not talking about the future. You are talking about the present. You are using the future as a way of

giving a bit of room to move" (Moore 2007, my transcript). Most of the sources for *VfV* that he mentions in the essay "Behind the Painted Smile" are science fictional and/or dystopian narratives:

> Orwell. Huxley. Thomas Disch. Judge Dredd. Harlan Ellison's "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman." "Catman" and "Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World" by the same author. Vincent Price's Dr. Phibes and Theatre of Blood. David Bowie. The Shadow. Nightraven. Batman. Fahrenheit 451. The writings of the New Worlds school of science fiction. Max Ernst's painting "Europe After the Rains." Thomas Pynchon. The atmosphere of British Second World War films. The Prisoner. Robin Hood. Dick Turpin... ([1983] 2005, 272)

Prominence is given to Orwell and Huxley, whose dystopias constitute the most immediate model for Moore's remediation (see Chapman 2011, 229). In particular, a parallelism can be identified between the scenarios of *VfV* and *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*. In both works, the world has turned into a "bare, hungry, dilapidated place" (Orwell [1949] 2008, 196). Britain is a post-apocalyptic nightmare ruled by a totalitarian government, which emerged after years of "national wars, civil wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions" (213). The graphic novel opens with an audio dispatch from the propaganda department, the Mouth, which glorifies the industrial achievements: "Productivity reports from Herefordshire indicate a possible end to meat rationing starting from mid-February 1998… This good news follows similar announcements concerning the increased production of both eggs and potatoes" (*VfV*, 9). The first page of Orwell's novel similarly features "a fruity voice […] reading out a list of figures which had something to do with the production of pig-iron" ([1949] 2008, 3). *VfV*'s second panel depicts a security camera, which alludes to Oceania's infamous telescreens. The destruction of London's ubiquitous audio and video surveillance systems – respectively managed by the Eye and the Ear – is one of the targets of V's later terrorist attacks (187). A further element shared by the two novels is the pervasiveness of propaganda. Norsefire's slogan "Strength Through Purity / Purity Through Faith" (11) is somehow reminiscent of "War is Peace / Freedom is Slavery / Ignorance is Strength", inscribed "On coins, on stamps, on the covers of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrappings of a cigarette packet – everywhere" (Orwell [1949] 2008, 29).

The links between *VfV* and *Brave New World* are less overt but nonetheless significant. Both works feature an alienated character who repeatedly quotes Shakespeare and strives to "*make* you free whether you want to or not" (A. Huxley [1932] 1994, 187, emphasis in the

original). Both fictional worlds are characterized by the utter elimination of culture, and especially literature, from the citizens' life. As *Brave New World*'s Resident World Controller for Western Europe Mustapha Mond explains, "that's the price we have to pay for stability. You've got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We've sacrificed the high art. We have the feelies and the scent organs instead" (194). In *VfV*, we are told that the party has "eradicated culture… Tossed it away like a fistful of dead roses… All the books, all the films… all the music" (18). The new British popular culture merely serves as a tool of ideological propaganda, "to toughen nationalist fanaticism by celebrating racial and spiritual purity" (Di Liddo 2009, 114). We catch a glimpse of a science fiction TV series, *Storm Saxon*, in which the titular character defends future Britain from "black butchers" who "rape our women [and] burn our houses, our possessions" (107). It worth noting that *Storm Saxon*, with its racial and sexual anxiety, reminds of the film described in *Brave New World*. There, a "golden-haired young brachycephalic Beta-Plus female" is rescued by "three handsome young Alphas" from "a gigantic Negro" (A. Huxley [1932] 1994, 146–47).

We have seen that N1 draws historical events and literary formulas from R to create the novel's dystopian setting. In a similar manner, the counterhegemonic narrative of N2 appropriates elements both from R and N1, and repurposes them into a strategy of political and cultural resistance. V acts as a "subversive system of signification" (Call 2008, 159) that incorporates and remoulds both endogenous and exogenous discourses. Through this process, he develops a morally ambiguous yet effective praxis to challenge the anti-utopian outlook with a new eutopian commitment. V's practice of creative appropriation can be seen as a marker of the graphic novel's postmodernism. The text suggests that "the meaning of a given word of statement is 'local,' bound to and potentially transformed by the context within which it is uttered. Signs (words and images) are peculiarly volatile because they can always be detached from their original contexts and inserted into new ones that can radically alter their meanings" (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy 1998, xxi). In the hybrid space of the graphic novel, V employs a tactic of *détournement*, "[inserting] already existing signs, images, and texts into new contexts in order to disrupt or reverse their established meanings" (xxi-xxii).

V's *détournement* is both material and cultural. Drawing upon N1, he hijacks the party's techniques of dominations. At the same time, he recuperates residual cultural elements from R, endowing them with new subversive meanings. The former appropriative strategy characterizes his vendetta against his former jailers at Larkhill, the party's "Resettlement Camp" in which he

was experimented on and eventually gained his powers. In this phase, V appropriates the regime's mechanisms of subjugation to use them against his enemies. First, he kidnaps Lewis Prothero, the Camp commander, and puts him into a Larkhill full-size diorama, in which the inmates have been replaced by Prothero's beloved dolls. This simulation serves an historicizing purpose. V has him relive the experience of his previous employment to re-create a suppressed historical event: "Do you remember, commander? Do you remember when it was people gathered in the sordid little enclosure? People half dead with starvation and dysentery?" (*VfV*, 33). V uses a similar *modus operandi* with Bishop Lilliman and Delia Surridge, respectively the chaplain and the doctor of Larkill concentration camp. The former dies from a poisoned wafer, handed out by V in a grotesque parody of the Communion Rite. "I am the devil, and I come to do the devil's work", says V quoting Charles Manson's follower Tex Watson.[39] As Chief of Scotland Yard Eric Finch points, out, "That's a dreadful, degrading way for a man like that to die. But you can see a sort of black poetry there, can't you? A sort of gallows humour?" (84). Doctor Surridge is slain in her sleep with a lethal injection. V gives her a painless death because she is the only one showing remorse, "What we did, what I did at Larkhill… That terrible knowledge it's been with me for so long. That I could do things like that (73).

V's subversive appropriation of the tools of subjugation also extends to mass media and technological apparatuses. In a gesture that recalls the seminal comic book "Superman Declares War on Reckless Drivers" (*AC#12*), he breaks into the studios of NTV (BBC's fictional replacement) to broadcast his televised message (*VfV*, 112–118). Later on, he hacks the super-computer Fate, which regulates the government's surveillance systems, and with which Susan has a morbid relationship (201). He manages to hijack the signal of the city's monitor cameras to his control room, which is similar to Susan's, and is furnished with numerous screens from which he "can see all London" (220). V is aware of the opportunities offered by computer hacking to his subversive, utopian project: "Fate is linked to everything. In a bureaucracy, file cards are reality. Punching new holes, we recreate the world" (218). However, he is also conscious that technology is a double-edged sword: "Unlike T.V., we cannot have too much of science, despite its nuclear quirks. With science, ideas can germinate within a bed of theory, form, and practice that assists their growth… But we, as gardeners, must beware… for some seeds are the seeds of ruin… and the most iridescent blooms are often the most dangerous" (220).[40] *VfV* thus ultimately expresses a Wellsian ambivalence about the "liberating possibilities of technology" (Huntington 1982, 125). Like the aëreopiles in *WSW*, the technical

improvements that ameliorate our life conditions can easily turn into instruments of oppression and domination, and vice versa.

The most morally questionable application of V's appropriative strategy takes place when he kidnaps and imprisons Evey (see Call 2008, 164). Impersonating a squad of Finger agents, he locks her in a simulation of Norsefire detention centre (148–162). In this instance, V uses the techniques of the regime not against its member, i.e. his enemies, but against an ally. To test Evey's loyalty and liberate her from her socially-constructed notion of femininity, he subjects her to physical and psychological torture. In a cell that evokes *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*'s infamous Room 101 – the rat –, he makes her endure the experience of his own incarceration. He also has her find the letter he received from Valerie, a gay actress who was incarcerated in the room next to V's: "I delivered it to you as it was delivered to me. The words you wept over were those than transformed me. Five years earlier" (175). Posing as a police officer, V tries to make her sign a forged confession that serves as commentary on the ethical implications of his actions, "On the fifth of November, 1997, I was abducted by the terrorist known as codename 'V' and then taken against my will to an unknown location. Once there, I was systematically brainwashed by means of drugs and torture, both physical and psychological. I was frequently subjected to sexual abuse during this period" (161). The confession literally describes what it is happening. Despite the alleged good cause, he is torturing and brainwashing her. After her liberation, when she protests, "You nearly drove me mad, V", the man replies, "If that's what it takes, Evey" (168).

The whole sequence also points to the centrality of legitimating narratives in political-utopian projects. V fabricates a story – the imprisonment – in which he counterpoises two conflicting substories – Valerie's letter, the forged confession – to prompt Evey to confront her situation from a different point of view. As a narrator, V applies the method of cognitive estrangement to replace the fascist representational system with his own counterhegemonic narrative. At the same time, he appropriates the regime's dystopian technologies and redeploys them into a new political praxis. The graphic novel thus mobilizes a dialectic of subversion and containment (see S. Greenblatt 1994) to negotiate a "strategically ambiguous position" (Moylan 2000b, 147) along the eutopian-dystopian continuum. It stages the tension between the lack of metanarratives and a series of morally questionable, epistemologically precarious micronarratives.

To legitimize his revolutionary agenda, V situates his violent terrorist acts within a political, cultural, and aesthetic tradition. N2 thus appropriates and often repurposes a number of cultural discourses from R – and, by extension, from the characters' historical past.[41] One of the most prominent is anarchism, the political philosophy that V counterpoises to Norsefire's fascism. Moore defines anarchy as "a romance. It is clearly the best way and the only morally sensible way to run the world. Everybody should be the master of their own destiny. Everybody should be their own leader" (2007, my transcript). To an extent, the anarchist superhero precipitating eutopia can be seen as a twentieth-century, Cold War development of Wells's and London's socialist *übermenschen*. In *VfV*, anarchism is used as a tool to overcome the Wellsian antinomy between superhumanity and left-wing utopianism (see Vallorani 1996a, 41), and to avoid the totalitarian drift depicted in *Miracleman*. As V points out, soon before his demise,

> Anarchy wears two faces, both creator and destroyer. Thus destroyers topple empires: make a canvas of clean rubble where creators can then build a better world. Rubble, once achieved, makes further ruins' means irrelevant. Away with our explosives, then. Away with our destroyers! They have no place within our better world. But let us raise a toast to all our bombers, all our bastards, most lovely and most unforgivable. Let's drink their health… then meet with them no more. (*VfV*, 222)

V sees the creation his anarchist utopia as a dialectical process, in which he represents the antithesis to the fascist thesis.[42] The synthesis between the two position – thus between N1 and N2 – is achieved by Evey, who fulfils the role of the "creator". After V's death, she wears his mask, assumes his identity and continues the revolution: "Reports of my death were… exaggerated. Tomorrow, Downing Street will be destroyed, the head reduced to ruins, an end to what has gone before. Tonight, you must choose what comes next. Lives of our own, or a return to chains. Choose carefully" (258).

Passed on from V to Evey, the Guy Fawkes mask symbolizes *VfV*'s appropriative strategy and cultural *détournement*. The graphic novel "joins in this popular-culture recuperation of Guy Fawkes" that started in the nineteenth century (Friedman 2010, 120), when "penny dreadful writers were converting England's most abominable traitor into a romantic hero" (Gavaler 2015, 50–51). Moore and Lloyd hence recover the historical figure, cleanse it of its religious connotations, and turn into a visual metaphor for the idea of violent rebellion. Lloyd, in particular, believes that portraying V as "a resurrected Guy Fawkes" would give the latter "the image he's deserved all these years. We shouldn't burn the chap every Nov. 5th, but celebrate

his attempt to blow up the Parliament!" (quoted in Moore [1983] 2005, 274). The author here also acknowledges the reciprocal contamination between the source text and target text. The appropriation and recontextualization open the possibility for new, subversive readings, which can be employed as a form of cultural resistance. An analogous process characterizes the intertextual links established by V. As in the already mentioned *Macbeth* quote, the character draws on a plethora of literary and cultural sources to subvert the cultural hegemony of the ruling party. Suggesting a postmodern and productive "de-categorization of high and low culture" (Brooker 1996, 65), V quotes Shakespeare *and* The Rolling Stones – "Please allow me to introduce myself… I'm a man of wealth… and taste" (*VfV*, 54); Yeats's *Second Coming* (196) *and* the Velvet Underground – "I'm waiting for the man" (223); William Blake's "And did those feet in ancient time" (48) *and* Enid Blayton's *The Magic Faraway Tree* (68). Moore and Lloyd also employ comics' formal hybridity to insert visual references in the panels. On the bookshelves of V's hideout, we can identify the spines of *Frankenstein*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Faust*, *From Russia with Love* and several others books (18). On the walls, high art paintings like Piero del Pollaiolo's *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (44) are juxtaposed to music hall bills and movie posters, as *White Heat* or *The Son of Frankenstein* (9). As Carpenter points, "the Shadow Gallery is a place that shows the outline of what was once was bathed in light but now resides in darkness. It's a shrine to the ephemera of pop culture, a mausoleum dedicated to life before fascism" (2016, 29). I would argue that V's hideout fulfils the same purpose of the Olympus in *Miracleman*, serving as a microcosm for the entire graphic novel. It is a container of previous works, a pastiche of high and low culture, and a superhero trope remoulded as an eutopian enclave and "alternative social matrix" (Murphy 2008, 14).

The significance of *VfV*'s appropriative strategy is twofold. First, it reinvigorates and problematizes the generic conventions of dystopian fiction, in which "the act of seeing beyond the present is at least in part an act of recovery of a lost tradition" (Huntington 1982, 136). V is a postmodern, morally questionable version of *WSW*'s Graham, who "is a revolutionary because he retains 19th-centry [*sic*] sentiments of justice which the future world claims to have outgrown" (*ibid*.). In the second place, the text applies the methods of historiographic metafiction to the history and social organization of culture. Here, the "postmodern use and abuse of convention […] works to 'de-doxify' any sense of the seamlessness between the natural and the cultural, the world and the text, thereby making us aware of the irreducible

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ideological nature of every representation – of past and present" (Hutcheon 1989, 53). *VfV* questions the very relationship between the 'world' and the cultural text. It suggests that the relationship among the elements of a cultural system – and between cultures and social groups – is ideologically and discursively constructed. The concept can be better understood through the categories devised by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (1977). In *VfV*, elements of R's "dominant" and "residual" (122) culture are subversively redeployed as "emergent" (123). They become "alternative or oppositional to the dominant elements" (R. Williams 1977, 124) that underpin the fascist and heteronormative rule of the Norsefire. Shakespeare and Milton thus join The Rolling Stones in the countercultural toolbox for the anarchist revolution.

As a postmodern graphic novel, *VfV* employs its formal and cultural inbetweenness to raise "the question of cultural tradition and conservation in the most fundamental way as an aesthetic and a political issue". (Huyssen 1986, 216). Drawing on the traditions of superhero comics and critical dystopias, it articulates a critique of Thatcher's Britain, while suggesting a subversive praxis of both cultural and political rebellion. It confirms that "control over the means of language, over representation and interpellation, is a crucial weapon and strategy in dystopian resistance" (Moylan 2000b, 149). However, the ending does not reveal if V's – and then Evey's – revolution succeeds. The text avoids closure, which opposes to utopian performativity and (pro)activism since it "serves the status quo, by reinscribing the reader within the dominant order" (Fitting 1987, 33). The graphic novel does not suggest the way in which V's "true order, which is to say voluntary order" (*VfV*, 195) would emerge. Nor does it explain why the chaos he has created would be different from the situation that preluded the rise of fascism. As V sings during musical interlude, "They say that life's a game and then they take the board away. They give you masks and costumes and an outline of the story. Then leave you all to improvise their vicious cabaret" (89).

3.4   Lies, Justice, and the American Way: *Watchmen*

This section considers the way in which *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons [1987] 2013) employs its intertextual engagement, residual connotations, and metatextuality to explore the ambiguous relationship between superhero comics, modernity, and utopia. The text draws both upon its

Wellsian predecessors and Moore's earlier revisionary superhero comics to articulate the historical antinomies of utopia and dystopia as conflicting narratives. The opposition between utopianism and anti-utopianism is thus negotiated through "[modes] of 'totalizing' representation" (Hutcheon 1989, 62), i.e. processes by which his history is rendered "coherent, continuous, unified" (*ibid.*). Adopting *Miracleman* and *VfV*'s pastiche as the structural device, the text thus explores in a self-reflexive manner the utopian implications of foundational narratives. Through textual fragments, epigraphs, prose excerpts, even the *mise en abyme* of a fictional pirate comic book, *Watchmen* suggests that "Myths, or at least lies, are required to ground and sustain a new state, not least by transmuting the violence committed by its founders into the less disruptive forms of coercion imposed by laws and constitutions" (Paik 2010, 23).

Considering the intertextual allusions and literary sources, we can see that *Watchmen* shares with *Miracleman* and *VfV* the Wellsian premise of a superhero precipitating eutopia. Adrian Veidt is a former costumed avenger known as Ozymandias, and now a multi-millionaire entrepreneur, who strives to "save Earth from hell [and] help her towards utopia" (*Watchmen*, 402). Obsessed with Alexander the Great and Ramses II – from which he has drawn his *nom de guerre* –, he wants to cut the 'Gordian Knot' of the Cold War and usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity. His master plan involves "[frightening the world] towards salvation with history's greatest practical joke" (372). Through his financial and technological means, he genetically engineers a telepathic squid-like monster, which strongly evokes Wells's Martians (Carney 2006, 16). He then teleports it to New York, where it kills three million people. Veidt hence simulates a devastating alien attack to force the superpowers into cooperation: "No one will doubt this Earth has met a force so dreadful it must be repelled, all former enmities aside" (392).[43] As in Moore's other revisionary superhero narratives, the creation of the ideal society is preluded by a major catastrophe. The difference with *Miracleman* and *VfV* is that here the apocalypse is brought about by the utopian superhero himself.[44]

Despite the outlandishness of his plan, Veidt shares several traits with *WSW*'s Graham. Both characters are left-wing, wealthy and reputable figures who "[resolve] to apply antiquity teachings to today's world" (*Watchmen*, 59). While the latter counterpoises Victorian socialism to Ostrog's proto-fascism, the former is inspired by Alexander the Great's "vision of a united world" (356): "I wanted to match his accomplishment, bringing an age of illumination to a benighted world" (*ibid.*). Once again, the construction of utopia depends on the reconstitution of historical memory. Furthermore, other similarities can be noted between Wells's seminal

romance and the graphic novel. One is the ambiguous spatiotemporal locus. Moore and Gibbons's work is in fact set in an alternate-history 1985 New York which cannot straightforwardly be identified as eutopian or dystopian, although it tends towards the latter. As in *WSW*'s future London, technological development has improved the life of citizens, but it has exacerbated the social and environmental problems of the time. Discrimination against gay people seems to have lessened (33), and yet street crime and violence are endemic (see for instance 272–274). Eugenics and genetical engineering are now capable of creating living animals almost from scratch (131), while America and Russia are on the verge of mutual annihilation (see Hoberek 2014, 119–20). In *Watchmen*'s New York, "Utopia" is only the name of a cinema that plays old science fiction movies, like *This Island Earth* (*Watchmen*, 87), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (327), and even H.G. Wells's *Things to Come* (162). This resonates with the graphic novel's depiction of utopia and dystopia as containers of stories, i.e. as frames of fictional narratives.

The initial point of departure between *Watchmen*'s and the reader's empirical framework is the appearance of masked avengers in 1938, the year *Action Comics* was first published. The second point of departure can be identified with the 1959 'birth' of Dr. Manhattan (Jonathan Osterman), a superpowered, quasi-omniscient godlike figure who alters in a significant way the political and technological scenario of the United States. Clearly modelled on Superman, he is a "walking nuclear deterrent" (*Watchmen*, 141) whose very existence tips the balance of the Cold War. In addition, "The technology that Dr. Manhattan has made possible has changed the way we thing about our clothes, our food, our travel" (142). The dependency on fossil fuel has been reduced through electric cars, thanks to "polyacetylene batteries" synthetized by Manhattan himself (125). As he points out, "The streets smell of ozone rather than gasoline. Flat intangible blots of gray slide across the summer sidewalks, the shadows of overhead airships" (134). However, Ozymandias stresses the harmful – we might say dystopian – implications of Manhattan's existence, which has hastened the nuclear arms race between US and URSS:

> I saw east and west, locked into an escalating arms spiral, their mutual terror and suspicion mounting with the missiles, making the possibility of disarmament progressively more remote. […] Meanwhile, expensive arsenals meant less cash to spend upon their old; their sick and homeless; on their children's education. […] Other factors emerged: arms expenditures boosted international lending rates. To repay soaring debt interests, nations like Brazil levelled their forests. Nuclear power, providing vital weapons-grade waste, became mandatory. War aside, atomic deadlock guided us towards environmental ruin.

> Jon's presence accelerated this, though less than you'd imagine. Any significant power imbalance would yield similar results. (370–371).

Despite his superhuman potential, Dr. Manhattan fails to affect proper utopian transformation (see Wolf-Meyer 2003, 507). Instead of creating a new political order *à la* Miracleman, he puts his powers at the service of American hegemony and imperialism. Thanks to his intervention, the US wins the war in Vietnam, which is annexed as the 51th State (*Watchmen*, 12). He also becomes a costumed superhero, but he fails to grasp the moral implications of his actions, "The newspapers call me a crimefighter, so the Pentagon says I must fight crime. […] The morality of my activities escapes me" (124). This hints at Dr. Manhattan's increasing disinterest in humanity and human affairs. In the early chapters of the graphic novel, he breaks up with his girlfriend Laurie Juspeczyk – another costumed avenger known as Silk Spectre –, whom he defines "my only link, my only concern with the world" (288). He is then (falsely) accused to have caused cancer in some of his associates, including his former lover Janey Slater. [45] He thus decides to sever his ties with humanity and leaves Earth for the solitude of Mars, in a gesture which somehow reminds of Sinclair's *The Overman*. Isaac Cates points out that "with truly great power, Moore suggests, comes a perspective that reveals the abdication of responsibility as the most moral option" (2012, 841). When Laurie asks him to prevent the imminent nuclear war, he replies "Don't you see the futility of asking me to save a world that I no longer have any stake in?" (288). He then adds that life itself "it's a highly overrated phenomenon" (293). As Paik argues, "from Dr. Manhattan's transcendent perspective, the concern with human survival is merely an anthropocentric prejudice" (2010, 27). It is worth noting that the tension between Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan – between true and false *übermensch* – evokes the conflict between Graham and Ostrog's "overman" in *WSW*. In both texts, the left-wing utopist obsessed with the past is in fact counterposed to a posthuman being that represents the next step in the evolutionary scale.

In *Watchmen*, this symbolic opposition is paralleled by the one between Ozymandias and Rorschach. These two characters can be both seen as variations on the Batman archetype, i.e. the non-superpowered costumed avenger. Veidt's "wealth, intelligence, birthday (1939), and perfected human physical prowess recall Batman. His role in his corporation suggests Bruce Wayne and Wayne Corp" (Klock 2002, 66). Rorschach – i.e. Walter Kovacs – is "the obsessed vigilante of Batman's earlies adventures, revived by Dennis O'Neill [*sic*] and Neil Adams for their early seventies run on the character and then carried to its logical extension by Frank

Miller in *The Dark Knight Returns*" (Hoberek 2014, 59) Besides the Caped Crusader, Rorschach is also modelled on Steve Ditko's 1960s superheroes The Question and Mr. A (Moore 2005). Moore defines the latter as "this marvelous Ayn Randian character who was utterly merciless with any form of evil and was unable to see any shades of grey in terms of morality. What we did with Rorschach was to take this even further" (in Sharrett [1988] 2012, 49). Kovacs is a reactionary, obsessed and paranoid vigilante whose dichotomous view of the world is reflected in the ink blots adorning his mask, "Black and white moving. Changing shape… but not mixing. No gray. Very, very beautiful" (*Watchmen*, 188). His journal, which opens the graphic novel, evokes the staccato monologues of hardboiled fiction, "Beneath me, this awful city, it screams like an abattoir full of retarded children. New York. On Friday night, a comedian died in New York. Somebody knows why. Down there… somebody knows. The dusk reeks of fornication and bad consciences" (22).

To a degree, Rorschach and Ozymandias serve as foils to each other. The former is a sociopath with a poor personal hygiene (31), who lives in a squalid apartment and rants about "lechers and communists" (9): "Now the whole world stands on the brink, staring down into bloody hell, all those liberals and intellectuals and smooth-talkers… and all of a sudden nobody can think of anything to say" (*ibid*.). Dr. Long, his prison psychiatrist, argues that "The cops don't like him; the underworld doesn't like him. Nobody likes him. I've never met anyone so alienated" (180). By contrast, Veidt is a charming intellectual/entrepreneur, who "looks like a goddamned god" and resides in Antarctica, in a fortress "opulent beyond the wildest dreams of Versailles" (378).[46] A journalist defines him as "one of America's best-respected and most consistently left-leaning superheroes quietly retired from crimefighting to pursue a career in business" (*ibid*.). The two characters have, however, some traits in common. Kovacs criticizes Ozymandias for his fixation about Ancient Egyptian culture, "[I] always mistrusted fascination with relics and dead kings… in final analysis, it's us or them" (334). He sees Ozymandias's trappings as symbols of softness and corruption, "He is pampered and decadent, betraying even his own shallow, liberal affectations" (27). Yet, Rorschach fails to acknowledge that he similarly fetishizes a largely imagined past. In his opening monologue, he claims that "[All the whores and politicians] had a choice, all of them. They could have followed in the footsteps of good men like my father, or president Truman. Decent men, who believed in a day's work for a day's pay" (9).[47] Later on, he writes, "Women's breasts draped across every billboard, every display, littering the sidewalk. Was offered Swedish love and French love… but not American

love. American love, like coke in green glass bottles… they don't make it anymore" (67). Most significantly, he keeps in his trench's pocket – and frequently uses – a bottle of 'Nostalgia' cologne (100, 207), created by Veidt Enterprises. As Veidt himself points out, describing the cologne's advertising campaign,

> It seems to me that the success of the campaign is directly linked to the state of global uncertainty that has endured for the past forty years or more. In an era of stress and anxiety, when the present seems unstable and the future unlikely, the natural response is to retreat and withdraw from reality, taking recourse either in fantasies of the future or in modified visions of a half-imagined past. (345).

Ozymandias's utopian plan involves a mixture of these two strategies. The utopist-pharaoh appropriates visions of "a half-imagined past" – the Gordian knot, Wells's Martians – to create a fantasy of the future (see Di Nocera 2006, 145).

In the graphic novel's structural framework, Ozymandias and Rorschach respectively epitomize utopianism and anti-utopianism. Veidt first realizes that as a non-superpowered crimefighter he could not fulfil his archetypal utopian potential, "I fought only the symptoms, leaving the disease itself unchecked. I despised myself, my sham crusade. Knowing mankind's problem, I'd blinded them to them. I felt helpless against forces greater than any I'd anticipated" (*Watchmen*, 367). He then becomes an entrepreneur, fuelling "the capitalist machine that persistently redirects popular desire and discontent by producing and disseminating 'all the properly Utopia fantasies of gratification and consumption that market society is capable of generating'" (Moylan 2000b, 144; quoting Jameson 1994, 63). Finally, he turns utopist, which he sees as a natural prosecution of his former career, "[I'm doing] What we all tried to do, after our initial struggle to find our feet. I'm trying to improve the world" (366). And for this purpose, is willing to kill three million people and terrorize the world into a new age of anxiety. In this regard, *Watchmen* is ominously prophetic. It shows that the Cold War's ideological and economic divergences are to be superseded by a false utopia, characterized by a similar if not greater degree of uncertainty, and constantly threatened from an alien, unfathomable enemy. And while the corpses accumulate, capitalism still manages to profit from the apocalyptic terror. Even though Ozymandias declares that his entrepreneurial activity has been instrumental in accumulating the wealth for his utopian plan (370), he does not intend to quit after the end of the Cold War. In fact, it is revealed that he plans to capitalize on the new socio-political scenario by producing a new cologne which will replace Nostalgia: "This new line is to be called the

'Millennium' line. The imagery associated with it will be controversial and modern, projecting a vision of technological Utopia, a whole new universe of sensations and pleasures that is just within reach" (345). Symbolizing the triumph of neoliberal capitalism, Veidt equates his post-ideological pseudo-utopia with new buyers and potential earnings (see Di Nocera 2006, 149).

By contrast, Rorschach is unable to accept Ozymandias's eutopia. He counterposes his unflinching integrity to the latter's morally questionable plan. Nonetheless, this does not mean that he is inherently anti-utopian. Kovacs in fact "shares Ozymandias' view that society has problems that desperately need correction; however, his vigilante methods are undeniably more stringent than the rest of his compatriots" (Hughes 2006, 551). He still retains the utopian commitment to the amelioration of society, which he re-articulates in dichotomic, objectivist terms. Commenting the assassination of his colleague Edward Blake (i.e. The Comedian) – later revealed to have been murdered by Ozymandias –, he claims "Soon there will be war. Millions will perish in sickness and misery. Why does one death matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this" (*Watchmen*, 32). By virtue of this "essentially moral" worldview (Moore in Sharrett [1988] 2012, 45), he is unable to accept the moral compromise that underpins Veidt's utopianism (402): "Evil must be punished. People must be told" (405). He prefers to be disintegrated at the hands of Dr. Manhattan, who "must protect Veidt's new utopia. One more body amongst foundations makes little difference" (406). As Paik points out, "Rorschach's refusal displays its sublime character in its status as perhaps the last free act, or the only free act possible in the utopian order that Ozymandias's deceit brings into being" (2010, 59).

I would argue that *Watchmen* dramatizes and negotiates the tension between utopianism and anti-utopianism as a conflict of different narratives. The text employs the analytical tools of historiographic metafiction to self-referentially problematize the making of history in fiction, suggesting that "a plot, be it seen as a narrative structure or as a conspiracy, is always a totalizing representation that integrates multiple and scattered events into one unified story" (Hutcheon 1989, 68). The ontological and epistemological distance between facts and fictions is best exemplified by Kovacs's nihilist monologue to his prison psychiatrist:

> The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. Live our lives, lacking anything better to do, devise reason later. Born from oblivion, bear children, hell-bound as ourselves, go into oblivion. There is nothing else. Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. (*Watchmen*, 204)

Here Rorschach is implying that historical facts – the murder of the Comedian, the alien squid – are only accessible through the narratives composed to signify them. In Hutcheon's words, that "Past events are given *meaning* […] by their representations in history" (1989, 82, emphasis in the original). Ozymandias's plan literally depends on the fact that people believe his narrative (see Hoberek 2014, 112). His utopia is an act of meaning-making. In this view, Rorschach's negation can be seen as a heroic attempt at creating a counter-narrative. He wants to replace Veidt's totalitarian closure with his own 'truth' – itself another story –, revealing that "world peace is won not only through deception and genocide, but also extorted by means of myths concocted by the very perpetrators of the slaughter" (Paik 2010, 26).

Within *Watchmen*'s metatextual framework, Ozymandias's and Rorschach's narratives are respectively modelled on the formulaic conventions of science fiction and crime fiction. These are the genres that influenced the creation of superhero comics in the late 1930s (see Chapter 2.5), and which are hybridized in *Watchmen*'s plot development. As a sci-fi movie director/producer, Veidt secretly hires and coordinates a series of creatives professionals who bring into being his view of an alien invasion, like comic book writer Max Shea; Hira Manish, a "surrealist painter"; or James Trafford March, a "respected 'hard' science fiction author" (*Watchmen*, 278). Veidt is also interested in futurology, a discipline linked to science fiction. He is able to foresee "subliminal hints of the future" (349) from multi-screen viewing. Also depicted in *VfV*, this activity formally recalls comic-book reading:

> Meaning coalesce from semiotic chaos before reverting to incoherence. Transient and elusive, these must be grasped quickly […]. This jigsaw-fragment model of tomorrow aligns itself piece by piace, specific areas necessarily obscured by indeterminacy. However, broad assumptions regarding thins postulated future may be drawn. We can imagine its ambience. We can hypothesize its psychology. In conjunction with massive forecasted technological acceleration approaching the millennium, this oblique and shifting cathode mosaic uncovers the bluepring for an era of new sensations and possibilities. (349).

Ozymandias's futurological approach carries metatextual implications. The graphic novel itself is a hybrid pastiche, a tale of tales from whose "semiotic chaos" a vision of the future emerges. The activity of the reader parallels the one depicted on the page.

Veidt's status as a sci-fi storyteller and interest in futurology point to H.G. Wells as a possible source of inspiration for the character. Both figures are influential left-wing intellectuals, who have become famous for their juvenile adventures – Veidt's career as

crimefighter, Wells's early romances –, and have subsequently turned utopians. Besides futurology, they also share an interest in eugenics (*Watchmen*, 131, 278). Like Wells, Ozymandias assumes a "pharaoh-like disdain for humanity. Yet at the same time, all of his efforts for the last two decades have been directed toward one goal – to save humanity from itself" (Prince 2011, 826). It can also be said that Wells was familiar with – and possibly attracted to – Egyptian imagery, as demonstrated by the Sphinx in *TM*. Critics have even pointed to a possible influence of P.B. Shelley's poem *Ozymandias* on Wells's *TM*. Smith argues that the statues first seen by the Time Traveller is "a sort of Ozymandias motif" (1986, 59), while Page writes that

> in both the poem and the novel, nature has reclaimed the aspirations and monuments of man. The last two lines of Shelley's poem, "Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away." – find their echo in the endless forest, scattered only occasionally with the remaining ruins of the golden ages, of the novel's 803rd millennium. (2012, 159).

Whereas Ozymandias extrapolates the future, Rorschach reconstructs the past. He is obsessed with discovering the Comedian's murderer and unearthing the conspiracy which he (rightfully) believes to exist. Like a crime fiction writer/private eye, he aims at imposing patterns and reorganizing the chaos into a coherent narrative.[48] It is not accidental that the graphic novel both opens and closes with his journal, i.e. the tangible sign of his work as a narrator. He first hypothesizes that Blake's death "could be part of revenge scheme" (67) orchestrated by former supervillain Moloch. Later, after Dr. Manhattan's departure, he starts to believe that "somebody's killing masks […]. Somebody wants us dead. Maybe some old enemy" (168). Whereas NYPD detectives think that murders "don't all need motives" (12), Rorschach asks "Why should corporation wish to kill costume heroes? Controlled by some old enemy, perhaps? But then, who has reasons for triggering Armageddon?" (334). Kovacs's alleged apophenia is criticized by Silk Spectre, with whom he has an uneasy relationship. She tells her former colleague Nite Owl, "You're not starting to take Rorschach's 'mask killer' bullshit seriously? I mean, he's psychotic. To him, everything's a conspiracy" (216). However, at the end of graphic novel, his journal represents the sole counter-narrative to the totalizing assumptions of Ozymandias's utopia: "If reading this now, whether I am alive or dead, you will know truth: whatever precise nature of this conspiracy, Adrian Veidt responsible. Have done best to make this legible. Believe it paints disturbing picture" (336).[49]

It is worth noting that the investment in meaning-making narratives reflects on the graphic novel's representational strategies. *Watchmen* is famously characterized by its rigid nine-panel grid, repeated with little to no variations throughout the entirety of the book. Benoît Peeters defines this mode of organization as the "Conventional Use" of the page ([1998] 2007, 1), in which the narrative and compositional aspects of the page are autonomous, and the former dominates on the latter (see Baetens and Frey 2015, 107–10). This mode is often defined as 'cinematic', inasmuch as the (often) homomorphic panels recall photograms or screens (Groensteen [1997] 2007, 96). In *Watchmen*, the conventional utilization resonates with the (ab)use of formal parallelism and symbolism to articulate a semiotically complex message. First, the grid suggests a quasi-modernist attempt at rationalizing the lived experience, by virtue of art's capacity to "give order to a potentially random reality" (Hoberek 2014, 52). [50] In the second place, the ample use of symbolic, recurring images – the bloodstained smiley face, the doomsday clock – is consistent with Ozymandias's and Rorschach's attempts to textualize reality and find/create patterns of meaning. In particular, the presence of symmetrical compositions and motifs, as Rorschach's mask,

> can, in the final instance, unlock a global symbolic interpretation of the work. Thus, the symmetry becomes an abstract category that notably addresses the relationship of man and woman, those of the superpowers, and a judgment of moral equivalence between the criminals and the heroes, since they use comparable methods – the category, in sum, that binds and allows us to think through the major themes of *Watchmen*. (Groensteen [1997] 2007, 100)

The last significant aspect concerns the relationship between *Watchmen*'s metafictional exploration of history, and the self-containedness of the graphic novel form. As a postmodern Anglo-American novel, *Watchmen* expresses an ambivalent "desire for and suspicion of totalization" (Hutcheon 1989, 63). Both Rorschach and Ozymandias strive to achieve closure, and to bring to an end the narratives constituting their *raison d'être*. (Hoberek 2014, 112). The success of the latter's utopia depends on the denouement permitted by the novelistic form. As he asks Dr. Manhattan, in a childish way, "John, wait, before you leave… I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end" (*Watchmen*, 409). Dr. Manhattan's reply is disconcerting: "'In the end'? Nothing ends, nothing ever ends" (*ibid.*). He reminds Ozymandias and the reader that stories may well come to an end. History, albeit fictionalized and narrativized, cannot (see Carney 2006, 18). For all its efforts at verisimilitude, *Watchmen* encounters a paradox. The

graphic novel surrenders to the partiality of narrative representation, accepting that history does not follow the rules of novelistic development.

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to show the way in which Moore's graphic novels articulate the superhero archetype's problematic relationship with utopianism. Reacquiring a self-contained form and an overt socio-political engagement, these text draw upon their Wellsian antecedents and residual connotations to deconstruct the conventions of the superhero genre. At the same time, they employ the superhero figure as a powerful tool to explore the antinomic opposition of utopia and anti-utopia, and to problematize the relationship of history and fiction within postmodernity.

The analytical repercussions of this latter point must not be underestimated. Despite the preliminary character of the present study, investigating the influence of Wells's scientific romances on American popular culture and British graphic novels has suggested that the superhero may be used to effectively probe a) the development of Anglo-American popular culture in the nineteenth century, especially with reference to modernity/modernism and postmodernity/postmodernism; b) the fertile cross-contamination between British and American cultures; c) the influence of literature, and in particular classic science fiction, on comics and graphic novels. I would argue that superhuman's ductility derives from its status as a mobile metaphor. In Wells's scientific romances, it epitomizes the anxiety of scientific and technological modernization in a late-Victorian, post-Darwinian world, the Huxleyan tension between evolution and ethics, and the relationship between science and society. In early-twentieth-century America, the superhero dialectically and ambiguously relates to the inherent utopianism of American culture, and to the fears of Depression-era urban modernity. In Moore's 1980s graphic novel, the character is used to explore the socio-political implications of Anglo-American neoliberalism, and to dramatize the epistemological shift of postmodernity. As Greg Carpenter points out,

> More than simply breaking the rules, more than simply making superheroes relevant with political subtext, more than simply injecting some realism, more than simply deconstructing them, Alan Moore establishes the most banal of narrative genres – the comic book superhero tale – as the ultimate paradigm for the postmodern world. (2016, 69)

As hybrid spaces of cultural negotiation, Moore's graphic novels scrutinize and re(contextualize) the fundamental ambiguities of Wells's early scientific romances. Anti-utopia, critical dystopia, and eutopia/dystopia: these texts display three ways in which, once the latent

utopianism of the superhero is liberated from the censorial and narrative constraints, the archetype's problematic nature emerges in a dramatic manner. The superhuman is no longer a menace *or* a messiah, but a combination of these two figures. As he fulfils Superman's potential as utopian saviour, *Miracleman* reveals the racial motifs and totalitarianism inscribed in the archetype. He is both Graham and Ostrog, the two facets of Wells's Over-man. In order to prevent a totalitarian drift, *VfV* instead resorts to a ritual form of self-abnegation. Identifying a nostalgia-driven hero as the antithesis to right-wing authoritarianism, as Wells does in *WSW*, Moore puts forward an effective praxis of cultural and political resistance. However, the author also displays the ethical complexities inherent in the character's appropriative strategy, and thus problematizes the generic and ideological framework of the critical dystopia. Finally, *Watchmen* further explores the socio-political terrains of eutopia and dystopia, hinting at a complete overlap of these two historical forms. At the same time, Moore and Gibbons's graphic novel investigates in a self-referential and intertextual way the relationship between utopianism and narratives. *Watchmen* suggests that utopia is, after all, a story.

The last question left unanswered concerns the outcome of the graphic novel's negotiation of utopianism and anti-utopianism. Does *Watchmen* "[retain] a utopian commitment at the core of its formally pessimistic presentation", or does it "[abandon] the textual ambiguity of dystopian narrative for the absolutism of an anti-utopian stance" (Moylan 2000b, 156)? Once again, we are faced with an unresolvable contradiction. *Watchmen*'s denouement places the graphic novel among those utopian texts that encourage activism and utopianism by rejecting the ideological implications of closure (see Fitting 1987). As Moore argues, "The last line of *Watchmen*, 'I leave it entirely in your hands,' was directed at the reader more than Seymour. The fate of the world is undecided: everyone has responsibility" (in Sharrett [1988] 2012, 48). However, the sole form of utopianism depicted in *Watchmen* stems from the authoritarian imposition of a patronizing *übermensch*. The very existence of the ideal society depends on deception and mystification. Utopia ultimately assumes the shape of a tentacled monster, surrounded by corpses, which obtusely stares at reader (*Watchmen*, 388).

Moore and Gibbons's graphic novel confirms that, as in *WSW*, the separation of utopia and dystopia "was never complete, nor it could be" (Kumar 1987, 126). The future dreaded in the scientific romances becomes reality: "We have labored long to build a heaven, only to find it populated with horrors" (*Watchmen*, 140). The 'Coming Beast' is here. The Wellsian myth of the utopian superhero reveals its nightmarish face.

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Notes

Notes to Chapter 1

[1] As of this writing, the originally-serialized *LEG* has been collected in four graphic novels (plus a spin-off trilogy), while a filmic adaptation was released in 2003.

[2] It is later revealed that M. is not Mycroft Holmes (Sherlock's less known brother), as Mina Murray suspects, but rather the mischievous arch-villain professor Moriarty. After the end of the second story-arc, the authors abandon all the original characters but Mina Murray and Alain Quatermain, who have become immortal, to narrate their feats in the twentieth century.

[3] The very idea of reproducing, not without a parodic intent, previous forms of literature, art, and/or entertainment is central to *LEG*. In fact, even though 'comics' is the major medium/form through which the series is narrated, the volumes include (fake) Victorian advertisements, illustrated short stories, ephemera and curiosities – like the colouring-book version of the eponymous picture of Dorian Gray, or the board game "Game of the Extraordinary Gentlemen". This semiotic and generic 'experiment in pastiche' even challenges the 'book form' in the third volume of the series, *Black Dossier* (Moore and O'Neill 2008), which features a collection of documents of different shape and purpose, including a faux unpublished play by W. Shakespeare.

[4] In the concluding climax of the novel, it is revealed that the material has been stolen by Prof. Moriarty to wage his personal 'war in the air' (another Wellsian motif) against his rival Fu Manchu. It is worth noting that Wellsian characters and motifs are also featured in "Allan and the Sundered Veil", a prose short story included as an appendix to the first volume. Serving as a prologue to the graphic novel, the short story narrates Allan Quatermain's adventurous encounter with the Time Traveller and the Morlocks from Wells's *The Time Machine*.

[5] Thomas Andrae considers Burroughs's John Carter, created in 1912, the first pulp, all-American "physical superman of a heroic mold" (Andrae 1980, 85).

[6] Jess Nevins has compiled a full list of annotations to the volumes of *LEG*, which can be found online at www.enjolrasworld.com/Jess%20Nevins/League%20of%20Extraordinary%20Gentlemen/LEG%20index.htm (4 May 2016).

[7] In their quest for the doctor, Alain and Mina also meet a mentally deranged Teddy Prendick, the narrator of Wells's novel. Prendick's mental disorder can be seen as a development of his paranoid instability at the very end of the novel: "Though I do not expect that the terror of that island will ever altogether leave me. At most times it lies far in the back of my mind, a mere distant cloud, a memory, and a faint distrust" (Herbert George Wells [1896] 2005, 138)

[8] With the term "continuity", I mean "the historical canon of incidents preceding the current moment for characters (and their various universes)" (Cates 2012, 838). The idea of shared universe (with a shared continuity) was introduced during the Golden Age, initially entailing a mere co-existence of characters in the same diegetic universe. The mechanism was perfected with the Marvel characters in the early sixties, when "stories began to build on one another, cross-referencing various titles to develop an engrossing mosaic of a whole new world" (Morrison 2012, 98).

[9] Patrick Parrinder suggests a link between Wells's work as a journalist and the scientific side of his literary output: "After 1987 Wells largely ceased to write scientific journalism, and there is a distinct poverty of strictly scientific ideas in *The First Men in the Moon* or *The Food of the Gods* as compared with his earlier romances" (1995, 63).

[10] Many critics stress Wells's indebtedness to Swift, whose *Gulliver's Travels* is likely to be the model for *romances* as *The Island of Dr. Moreu* (Draper 1987, 47) or *The First Men in the Moon* (Williamson 1973, 115). Wells himself pays his respects in the preface to 1931 reprint of *The Time Machine*, which he defines (writing in third person), "like the kindred *Island of Doctor Moreau,* a clumsy tribute to a master to whom he owes an enormous debt" (Herbert George Wells [1895] 2005, 95)

[11] Biblical references are frequent in Wells's early fiction. Probably the most famous examples are the names of the creatures in *The Time Machine* (1895), Morlocks and Eloi. The former moniker "recalls Moloch, the biblical term for infanticide, generally taken to be the name of a false god to which Israelite children were sacrificed" (Draper 1987, 37), while Eloi "echoes with 'elite', and also with 'elohim' (Lord and God in Hebrew)" (Warner 2005, xii).

[12] Interestingly enough, the reference to the "Martians" is absent in the original version *When the Sleeper Wakes,* serialized in 1899.

[13] In this regard, Graham adheres to the pattern by which "supersaviors in pop culture function as replacement for the Christ figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism. But their superhuman abilities reflect a hope for divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind' (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 6–7).

[14] Created in 1941 by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Captain America* was originally conceived as a propaganda comic book. Largely forgotten after the end of WW2, the character was revived by Stan Lee and Kirby in 1964. The hiatus was diegetically justified by claiming that the war hero had fallen in a state of suspended animation in the final days of the war, and he was brought back to by the Avengers life in the early sixties (see Dittmer 2007). The link between *WSW* e Captain America is made explicit in a 1968 comic book, *When Wakes the Sleeper* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, which quotes extensively from Wells's classic.

[15] The image of the 'dying sun' was a recurring obsession for the Victorians, as explained by Gillian Beer (2006).

[16] "Moreover, the cosmic nature born with us and, to a large extent, necessary for our maintenance, is the outcome of millions of years of severe training, and it would be folly to imagine that a few centuries will suffice to subdue its masterfulness to purely ethical ends. Ethical nature may count upon having to reckon with a tenacious and powerful enemy as long as the world lasts." (T. H. Huxley 1895, 85)

[17] As he explains in the pamphlet *The Discovery of the Future,* forecasting the Earth's development is both viable and useful: *"*seeking for operating causes instead of for fossils, and by criticising them as persistently and thoroughly as the geological record has been criticised, it may be possible to throw a searchlight of inference forward instead of backward, and to attain to a knowledge of coming things as clear, as universally convincing, and infinitely more important to mankind than the clear vision of the past that geology has opened to us during the nineteenth century" (Herbert George Wells 1902, 50–51).

[18] In his autobiography, Wells's attack upon Marxism in quite explicit: "It was only after a year and more of biological work at the Normal School of Science, that I came full face upon Marxism and by that time I was equipped to estimate at its proper value its plausible, mystical and dangerous idea of reconstituting the world on a basis of mere resentment and destruction: the Class War. Overthrow the "Capitalist System" (which never was a system) was the simple panacea of that stuffy, ego-centred and malicious theorist. His snobbish hatred of the bourgeoisie amounted to a mania" (Herbert George Wells [1934] 1984, 280).

[19] The influence of Heraclitus on Wells is still to be adequately addressed. In *The Future in America*, Wells claims to have only recently discovered the Greek philosopher, who has arguably anticipated many of his intellectual breakthroughs: "I have since then informed myself more fully about Heraclitus, there are moments now when I more than half suspect that all the thinking I shall ever do will simply serve to illuminate my understanding of him" (Herbert George Wells 1906, 3). As Justin Busch suggests, Wells employed Heraclitus's thought to "[cross-fertilize] the Platonic philosophical influences on him" (2009, 12).

[20] Wells outlines this narrative and epistemological discontinuity at the beginning of *A Modern Utopia*: "The Utopia of a modern dreamer must needs differ in one fundamental aspect from the Nowheres and Utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world. Those were all perfect and static States, a balance of happiness won for ever against the forces of unrest and disorder that inhere in things. […] But the Modern Utopia must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages." (Herbert George Wells [1905] 2005, 11)

[21] Recent criticism has attacked the narrator's reliability, and his idea that the Martians are "unsympathetic creatures" without any "emotional substratum". These creatures are in fact described as showing sympathy towards their peers. Parrinder points out that "The small amount of evidence given in the story does not, in fact, support this myth of Martian hard-heartedness. In many respect the behave just as we would in comparable circumstances. They carry away a fallen comrade from the field of battle (106), and their system of hootings and howlings constitutes a more or less recognizable form of speech" (Parrinder 2004, 12).

[22] Quite interestingly, both characters have been played on the silver screen by Marlon Brando.

[23] As in many colonial tales, racial and sexual otherness are overdetermined, and in *IDM*'s "racialized regime of representation" (Hall 2013, 259), female promiscuity serves as a disturbing and destabilising factor: "Some of them – the pioneers in this, I noticed with some surprise, were all females – began to disregard the injunction of decency – deliberately for the most part. Others even attempted public outrages upon the institution of monogamy. The tradition of the Law was clearly losing its force" (*IDM*, 123).

[24] It is worth noting that Moreau's failure actually disprove Wells's own theories outlined in "The Limits of Individual Plasticity".

[25] The notion of transhumanism was popularised in the English-speaking world by Julian Huxley (Thomas's grandson and Aldous's brother). In a 1957 essay, he claims that "The new understanding of the universe […] has

defined man's responsibility and destiny – to be an agent for the rest of the world in the job of realizing its inherent potentialities as fully as possible" (1957, 13). Therefore, "The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself – not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps *transhumanism* will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature" (17, emphasis in the original).

[26] In this regards, the use of a chemical concoction, and the permanent modification of the bodily features, points to R.L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as a possible literary source (see McLean 2009, 79).

[27] In this regard, Cantor points out that "Griffin thinks of himself as a Nietzschean superman […]. But at the same time, Griffin is a brilliant study of what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. In many ways, his invisibility scheme is an attempt to compensate for his deep feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and powerlessness. (1999, 99).

[28] Wells's critique of individualism in *IM* has been also interpreted in strict economic terms. As Cantor suggests, "Griffin's invisibility symbolizes the workings of an impersonal, decentralized, and – in Wells's view – dangerously chaotic market economy that fails to respect the dictates of either traditional communal ties or established government authorities" (1999, 91–92).

[29] Another interesting – and somehow amusing – attack is in *The Future in America*, in the chapter in which Wells discusses the industrial squalor of Chicago. After having described the "brutal economic conflict and squalid filthiness, offensive to every sense", he in fact comments "I wish I could catch the soul of Herbert Spencer and tether it in Chicago for awhile to gather fresh evidence upon the superiority of unfettered individualistic enterprises to things managed by the state" (Herbert George Wells 1906, 61).

[30] This idea of cooperation will serve as the basis for the political and sociological propositions of the later Wells. In *The New America: the New World,* published between the Wars, he claims that "it is a plain fact of the situation that there is no sound and enduring escape from the wanting distresses not only of America, but mankind, except through the rapid organization of permanent international co-operation" (1935, 34; see also Frankel 2007, 82–83)

[31] Wells raises a similar point in an 1899 interview, in which he stresses the importance and the danger of genius. He argues that "The age of democracy is over. […] What seems to be inevitable in the future is rule by an aristocracy of organisers, men who manage railroads and similar vast enterprises. You look at the organization that is necessary before you can launch one efficient ironclad, you will realise what power in the future is likely to lie in the hands of the men possessing that form of genius. […] The people are blinded by democratic forms of government; and there lies before the world in the future the dangers of domination by a sort of irresponsible aristocracy – and nothing could be worse than that" (Herbert George Wells and Lynch [1899] 2000, 387).

[32] This concept, clearly inspired by Plato's Guardian, will eventually translate into the Samurai, the Open Conspiracy, the Mind of the Race.

[33] The idea that utopia should be located in the future, and not in a secluded location, had become the norm in the eighteenth century: "Not in the past, as the myth of the Golden Age had suggested, but in the future lay the secret of human nature and human destiny" (Kumar 1987, 39).

[34] "The phrase 'going native' indicates the colonizers' fear of contamination by absorption into native life and customs. The construction of *native* cultures as either primitive or degenerate in a binary discourse of colonizer/ colonized led, especially at the turn of the century, to a widespread fear of 'going native' amongst the colonizers in many colonial societies. […] The threat is particularly associated with the temptation posed by inter-racial sex, where sexual liaisons with 'native' peoples were supposed to result in a contamination of the colonizers' pure stock and thus their degeneracy and demise as a vigorous and *civilized* (as opposed to *savage* or degenerate) *race*. But 'going native' could also encompass lapses from European behaviour, the participation in 'native' ceremonies, or the adoption and even enjoyment of local customs in terms of dress, food, recreation and entertainment" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2009, 106, emphasis in the original).

[35] "Coming from a mode of discourse self-confidently representational and nonfictional [Darwin's story] enters the dubiously representational realms of narrative and fiction; the boundaries between the two kinds of narrative, the two kinds of representation, blur" (Levine 1988, 2; also quoted in Vallorani 1996a, 20).

[36] The lack of teleology in the world described by Darwin can be seen reflected in the narrative structure of Victorian novels. As Levine suggests, "In the realist novel itself, certain conventional elements continue, willy-nilly, to imply teleology, but the movement is clearly away from the 'plot'; and the Trollopean determination to focus on characters and to let the plot emerge from their encounters is a characteristically Darwinian way to deal with narrative and change" (1988, 18).

[37] It should be noted that the word "lemur", other than the animal, was (and is) also used to indicate "a ghost or spirit of the dead" (McLean in Herbert George Wells [1895] 2005, 100, n.6)

[38] "As they made no effort to communicate with me, but simply stood round me smiling and speaking in soft cooing notes to each other, I began the conversation. I pointed to the Time Machine and to myself. Then

hesitating for a moment how to express time, I pointed to the sun. At once a quaintly pretty little figure in chequered purple and white followed my gesture, and then astonished me by imitating the sound of thunder" (*TM*, 25).

[39] Bentham's thought is likely to have been a source of influence for Wells (see Vallorani 1996a, 34)

[40] Like other fictional terrorists, he can be seen as a "[remnant] of a romantic belief in the power of marginalized persons to transform history" (Scanlan 2001, 2).

[41] The grotesque and largely ineffectual terrorism of Griffin has its catastrophic counterpart in the attacks of the Martians. In *WWs*, as Alex Houen suggests, "London is terrorized by 'Martians' with sophisticated technology and weaponry. Terrorism in the novel is not just associated with the flouting of war conventions, but also with attempts to institute an *Other world of possibility* on earth" (2002, 32 emphasis in the original).

[42] In addition to the fallacy of anthropocentrism, this passage from *WWs* also demonstrate the extent to which the ideology of imperialism permeates the late-Victorian mentality. Not only do the "terrestrial men" fantasises about "other men upon Mars", but they also consider – or rather hope – that the latter may be "inferior", and thus ready to be colonised (see McLean 2009, 94).

[43] This last metaphor, drawn from the Ancient Testament, is congruent with the numerous Biblical allusions that permeate the narrative.

[44] 'Unman' relies on the twofold meaning of 'man', i.e. 'male' and 'human'. The Oxford Dictionary of English gives several definitions, which oscillate between "To deprive of the attributes of a man or human being" and "To deprive of qualities traditionally associated with men, such as courage, self-control".

[45] The idea of liquefaction contrasts with the 'gaseousness' of the Martian, which are often associated to mists, fogs, and the lethal black gas: "the steam was rising in a whirling white fog that at first hid the Martians altogether" (65); "They moved, as it seemed to us, upon a cloud, for a milky mist covered the fields and rose to a third of their height" (85). "These canisters smashed on striking the ground--they did not explode--and incontinently disengaged an enormous volume of heavy, inky vapour, coiling and pouring upward in a huge and ebony cumulus cloud, a gaseous hill that sank and spread itself slowly over the surrounding country" (88).

[46] Even though most sources report that the romance was entirely serialized in 1899 (see Stover 2000, 1), *The Collector's Book of Science Fiction by H.G. Wells* (1978) – the edition I employ for this study – claims that the serialization in *The Graphic* started in 1898. For the sake of simplicity, only the first date is reported.

[47] The idea that *WSW* represents a turning point in Wells's career is confirmed by the author himself in the 1921 preface to *The Sleeper Awakes*, in which he describes it as "the first of a series of books which I have written at intervals since that time; they are all 'fantasias of possibilities'; each one takes some great creative tendency, or group of tendencies, and develops its possible consequences in the future" (Herbert George Wells [1910] 2005, 7)

[48] A few pages before, the narrator had already suggested the alleged incompatibility between a scientific and novelistic exposition: "So poor romance, with its craving for situation, goes down under the pitiless hells of fact" (*sWWs*, 80).

[49] The ideological implications of the first- and third-person alternation can be seen as another form of heteroglossia. As Levine points out, "Within Victorian fiction, novels that seem to resist the conventions of 'realism' […] reject also that stance of third-person detachment through which the Victorian novelist seeks the authority of science in the recording of human life" (1988, 14).

[50] The way in which sociology (therefore, in Wells's mind, utopianism) replaces the natural sciences is also visible in the intertextual network established by the romances. Whereas the early anti-utopian fables substantiate the narrative speculation through scientific articles, *WSW* openly refers to utopian texts.

[51] This prescriptiveness is also clearly visible in the deontic modality of *MU*. The text in fact opens with: "The Utopia of a modern dreamer *must needs* differ in one fundamental aspect from the Nowheres and Utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world" (*MU*, 11, emphasis added). Throughout the rest of the novel, modals and modal expressions as 'must', 'should', 'is to' are used to describe the features of Wells's utopian project.

[52] Wells also reemploys the setting in the coeval novella *A Story of the Days to Come* (hereinafter *SDC*). Serialized in the June to October 1899 issue of *The Pall Mall Magazine*, the novella narrates the tribulations of two lovers from different social classes.

[53] However, it should be noted that Graham seems to be emarginated from humanity even before his coma (Vallorani 1996a, 64–67). He is "a lone wolf, a solitary man, wandering through a world in which I had no part" (*WSW*, 363). Moreover, his inability to sleep – a feature he shares, quite interestingly, with the Martians of *WWs* – sets him apart from the biological and social norm.

[54] The characters' inability to recognise the alien *novum* is a recurrent motif in Wells's romances.

[55] As Chris Gavaler demonstrates, the concept has a biblical origin (2015, 38). In *WSW*, it comes to reinforce Graham's Christological and messianic connotation.

[56] Several critics have stressed that the element triggering Graham's final rebellion is not his political or ethical consciousness, but the racial anxiety against the use of the 'negro police': "White men must be mastered

by white men" (*WSW*, 457). For instance, Huntington writes that "A sense of racial outrage displaces and obscures the problem of economic oppression" (1982, 126; see also Parrinder 2005, xii).

[57] We are in fact told that, despite the technological wonders of the year 2100, man is fundamentally the same as before: "It astonished him to realise how little the common man had changed in spite of the visible change in his conditions" (*WSW*, 420). The split between social/cultural and biological evolution, with the latter being much slower, is a recurrent motif in Wells's writings. He first discusses it at length in the essay "Human Evolution, an Artificial Process" (Herbert George Wells [1896] 1975), and the notion also informs the later utopia *Men Like Gods*: "except for the fuller realisation of his latent possibilities, the common man in Utopia was very little different from the ordinary energetic and able people of a later stone age or early bronze age community. They were infinitely better nourished, trained, and educated, and mentally and physically their condition was clean and fit, but they were the same flesh and nature as we are" (Herbert George Wells [1923] 1976, 189).

[58] In this latter notion there lies the major difference between the artilleryman's and Ostrog's speech. In the older novel, the imagined eugenic utopia is ultimately functional to the preservation of the race, "to invent a sort of life where men can live and breed" (*WWs*, 156). The goal for humankind is to regroup, in order to overturn the alien dominators: "behold! Man has come back to his own" (158). In *WSW*, by contrast, Ostrog augurs a "graceful destruction" (*WSW*, 443) and the subjugation to a plutocracy: "The day of democracy is past […]. To-day is the day of wealth. Wealth now is power as it never was power before – it commands earth and sea and sky. All power is for those who can handle wealth" (442). Nonetheless, it is undeniable that some of the concepts articulated by Ostrog (and by the artilleryman) are somehow close to Wells's later utopian vision. As Huntington points out, "Wells is generating a […] confusion when he gives Ostrog arguments close to his own ideas" (1982, n. 22). This may be one of the reasons why, according to Parrinder, "Wells's own sympathies in this battle [between Ostrog and Graham] are harder to pin down than we might expect" (2005, xxi).

[59] The Overman motif can also be found in the cognate novella *SDC*: "If life were not a moment, the whole of history would seem like the happening of a day… Yes we shall pass. And the city will pass, and all the things that are to come. Man and the Overman and wonders unspeakable. And yet…" (Herbert George Wells [1899] 1900, 262)

[60] A full scanned copy of Tille's translation can be found on Archive.org (https://archive.org/details/thusspakezarathu00nietiala, 16 October 2016). The word Overman is also not used in the 1909 translation by Thomas Common, who instead employs "superman", probably after G.B. Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1903).

[61] *WSW*'s twofold structure is also evoked by the romance's title, that can be seen as a peculiar occurrence of Wells's "frequent practice of ending a paragraph with a set of ellipsis […] to encourage the reader to go off on their train of thought" (Busch 2009, 61–62). Even though there are not ellipsis points, "When the Sleeper Wakes" is a subordinate with no main clause, whose cryptic absence still suggests the second pole of the dialectic (for a full analysis of the title, see Vallorani 1996a, 38–39). The "Two-World" structure can also be identified in *SDC*. Since there is no time-travel, here the Victorian age is evoked through cultural nostalgia, mostly shaped by novels describing the "quaint, adventurous, half-civilised days of the nineteenth century, when men were stout and women simple" (*SDC*, 177). Moreover, the 'old days' are somehow represented by the bucolic scenes in the abandoned countryside out of the megalopolis, a kind of setting absent in *WSW*.

[62] This does not mean that Wells was completely disinterested in the formal innovations of modern art and literature, as demonstrated by the widespread use of 'impressionist' descriptions in his romances (see Cantor and Hufnagel 2006).

[63] A similar expression is present in *SDC*: "Then silently, side by side, they went across the empty garden-space into the old high road, and set their faces resolutely towards the distant city towards the complex mechanical city of those latter days, the city that had swallowed up mankind" (*SDC*, 230)

[64] Parrinder also specifies that the Ostrog's epithet 'Boss' had, in Wells's time, an American connotation: "Ostrog is also known as the the the 'Boss', the word used in the United States for a wealthy and powerful political fixer whose task is to deliver the vote for his party" (2005, xx).

[65] In spite of being a distinctly American phenomenon, trusts were at the centre of a heated debate in the United Kingdom as well. For instance, a critical account that Wells might have read before writing *WSW* is William Clarke's contribution in *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1891), a collected work edited by G.B. Shaw.

[66] Quite interestingly, Wells's ambivalence somehow parallels the general attitude of 1910s American muckrakers, who criticized the trusts while expressing a genuine admiration for the successful businessmen (Maffi [1981] 2013, 128).

Notes to Chapter 2

[1] Even though the romance is presented with the 1899 illustrations by Henri Lanos, the text reprinted in *Amazing Stories Quarterly* is actually the 1910 revised edition, published as *The Sleeper Awakes*. The reason why Gernsback used the original title is unknown.

[2] A full list of the contents published in each *Amazing Stories* issue can be retrieved on "The Internet Speculative Fiction Database", accessible here http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/seriesgrid.cgi?19333 (5 December 2016)

[3] Gernsback's history of the genre was also shared by his readers: for instance, Jack Williamson wrote in a letter to the fifth issue of *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, "while this form of literature was invented by an American, Edgar Allan Poe, and while America is the land of scientifiction today, Wells and Verne were its first two great masters, and it is chiefly to their work that we must look for scientific predictions that have been fulfilled" (1929, 140).

[4] Gernsback's activity as genre historiographer would find a cultural equivalent in the work of many comics artists and editors, who in the late sixties categorized the pioneering – and often forgotten – authors of the early nineteenth century (Sabin 1993, 172; Brownstein 2005, 237; Baetens and Frey 2015, 222).

[5] This cultural and ethnic connotation is another feature shared between American sci-fi and sequential art, especially in the superhero genre. In the first half of the nineteenth century, a large amount of influential comics artists, editors and publishers had a Jewish and/or European surname, often anglicized (G. Jones 2004, xiv; see also Fingeroth 2007 for a full treatment of the topic). To a certain extent, the fertile contamination is still visible today. Many leading figures of the American comic book industry are European (British for the most part) and/or Jewish, with Neil Gaiman representing both domains.

[6] Fandom, conventions and fanzines are other characteristic shared between science fiction and superhero comics. Sabin dates the creation of a stable community of comics enthusiast to the late sixties, when serious comics collecting begun, specialist comics shops opened, and conventions started being organized (Sabin 1993, 62–65).

[7] The publication date is uncertain. Ashley claims that *Cosmic Stories* was published in 1930 (2000, 80), while Jones dates the publication to 1929 (2004, 37). The *Encyclopedia of Science* Fiction, now available online, reports both dates (Clute et al. 2015a). The 1929 hypothesis is presumably confirmed by Siegel himself, who in a 1983 interview claims "I've already mentioned how in 1929 I put out this fanzine [Cosmic Stories]: I definitely wanted to be a science fiction writer. Since I was running into a little trouble in getting other people to go along with my desires and publish my stuff, I began publishing it myself" (Siegel in Andrae, Blum, and Coddington 1983, 8).

[8] In his "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", Sargent lists nineteen labels, with different ideological implications, for the idea of 'intentional utopian community' (Sargent 1994, 13–14). He also suggests a definition, i.e. "a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose" (15).

[9] Bellamy's novel is undoubtedly the most successful and influential American technological utopia of the late eighteenth century, but it was not the first. For instance, Segal indicates John Macnie's *The Diothas; Or, A Far Look Ahead* (1883) as notable precursor (2012, 82).

[10] Bellamy famously claimed that "the word socialist is one I could never well stomach. In the first place it is a foreign word in itself, and equally foreign in all its suggestions. It smells to the average American of petroleum, suggests the red flag, and with all manner of sexual novelties, and an abusive tone about God and religion, which in this country we at least treat with respect" (Bellamy in Kumar 1987, 141–42).

[11] Lawrence and Jewett first introduced the 'American monomyth' in the homonymous 1977 book. The notion stems from Joseph Campbell's monomyth, described in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), of which it constitutes a culturally- and historically-specific revision.

[12] Even though the short story was not as influential as *Nick of the Woods,* the dual-identity vigilante stock character has a significant precursor in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Gray Champion*, published in 1835 (Coogan 2006, 148–50; Gavaler 2015, 56–59). An interesting subset of this archetype is the "well-born, dual-identity hero" (see Gavaler 2014), which would inform Bob Kane and Bill Finger's Bat-Man. It originated with Emma Orczy's 1905 novel *Scarlet Pimpernel*, and was subsequently popularized by Douglas Fairbanks's film *The Mark of Zorro* (1920).

[13] A later example of a socialist superman is featured in Sherwood Anderson's *Marching Men* (1917). The novel's main character, Beaut McGregor, is in fact described a quasi-religious charismatic reformist that aims at empowering and organizing the masses of workers in disarray (Maffi [1981] 2013, 221).

[14] As Sinclair states in his autobiography, speaking of the League for Industrial Democracy, "Soon after our start, we organized amass meeting at Carnegie Hall at which the principal speaker was to be Jack London. I had corresponded with him from the time of his first novel" (Sinclair 1962, 113).

[15] Despite the brevity of this utopian experiment, "Sinclair would spend the rest of his life dreaming about his time there" (Novak 2013). A certain degree of utopianism also permeates Sinclair's 1934 political campaign for Governor of California, named EPIC (End Poverty in California). The main tenets of the EPIC campaign are outlined in the 1933 pamphlet-novella *I, Governor of the California and How I Ended Poverty*. It reads a sort of utopian novel that imagines Sinclair's victory as Governor of California, and the subsequent, successful implementation of the EPIC plan: "The process of EPIC was like that of a swiftly flowing river earing into a sand bank. Private industry began to crumble; and as quickly as any productive enterprise failed, it was made over into a public institution. Nothing could withstand the current of co-operation" (Sinclair 1933, 59)

[16] "Daniel" is a possible nod to Defoe, whose Robinson Crusoe – another lone islander – is explicitly mentioned in the novelette (see note 18).

[17] "I have withdrawn myself from the confusion of cities and multitudes, and spend my days surrounded by wise books, – bright windows in this life of ours, lit by the shining souls of men. I see few strangers, and have but a small household. My days I devote to reading and to experiments in chemistry, and I spend many of the clear nights in the study of astronomy. There is – though I do not know how there is or why there is – a sense of infinite peace and protection in the glittering hosts of heaven. There it must be, I think, in the vast and eternal laws of matter, and not in the daily cares and sins and troubles of men, that whatever is more than animal within us must find its solace and its hope" (*IDM*, 131).

[18] Daniel seems to have rejected the very idea of employing tools to modify the surrounding environment and achieve better living conditions. As Edward notes, "First of all, of course, my thought was of his home – of his surroundings and his ways. I rummaged about his cavern, wondering at his makeshifts – or rather, at his lack of them" (*The Overman,* 21). Later on, he claims "I had my youthful recollections of Robinson Crusoe; and as a man of science, I could naturally not spend two minutes conversing with Daniel and examining his affairs without thinking some new device by which he could have made his lot more tolerable" (25–26).

[19] It is not clear whether Sinclair uses "his" as generic possessive adjective, or actually intends to implicate that these creatures are masculine.

[20] "Solitary eutopias are possible, but they are rare and, with these few exceptions, social interaction is fundamental to the Utopian form" (Sargent 1994, 13).

[21] It is possible that Hugo's name might be a nod to *Hugo Hercules*, a comic strip by German-born illustrator and painter Wilhelm Heinrich Detlev Körner (1878-1938), serialized from September 1902 to January 1903 in the Chicago Tribune. The series was "the first positive presentation of a heroic superman in comics" (Coogan 2006, 165) and features a sort of cowboy with superhuman strength lifting cars, houses, elephants (see Gavaler 2015, 122). In a strip, he plays in a football game, an element that is also present in Wylie's novel (the strip can be accessed here http://comicbookplus.com/?dlid=41202, 10 April 2017). It is worth noting that "Hercules" is predictably one the mythical figures to which Hugo Danner is likened (*Gladiator*, 18).

[22] The injection takes place when Hugo's religious mother is unconscious, after she has been drugged by her husband. Gavaler defines Hugo's "superheroic conception" as a "date rape" (Gavaler 2015, 219) The name 'Abednego' has a biblical origin, whose story is told in the Book of Daniel. Abednego was a Jew who was thrown into a furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, when he and other two Jews called Shadrach and Meshach refused to bow down to a statue of the king. They were saved by an angel.

[23] *FG* influenced another British novel about a superpowered baby, i.e. J.D. Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1911) (see Johnson 2014, 27).

[24] As Richard Lupoff writes, "In a 1953 essay titled 'Science Fiction and Sanity in an Age of Crisis,', [Wylie] mentions his boyhood fondness for pulp science fiction. However, by this time, he had largely turned against his colleagues in the field. He wrote that 'their orientation leads most frequently to wild adventure, wanton genocide on alien planets, gigantic destruction and a piddling phantasmagoria of impossible nonsense.' He concluded that, 'Most science fiction is trash, ill-conceived and badly written.'" (Lupoff 2009, 8). The essay to which Lupoff refers is included in *Modern Science Fiction: Its Meaning and Its Future* (1953), edited by Reginald Bretnor.

[25] Both texts employ the 'pygmy' image to signify the distance between the new race and common humans. Young Redwood will not be "one solitary Gulliver in a pigmy world" (*FG*, 67), while Hugo Danner's strength will grow "until Samson and Hercules would be pygmies beside him" (*Gladiator*, 18).

[26] It is also worth considering the growing link between eugenics and German National Socialism: "the Nazis mortally wounded eugenics as a mass culture movement. All that 'pure-blood stuff' would be forever associated with the über-Aryan Adolf Hitler and the war Hollywood is still fighting" (Gavaler 2015, 155).

[27] "You may imagine the spreading consternation in this ordered world when it became known that the Princess who was affianced to the Prince, the Princess, Her Serene Highness ! with royal blood in her veins ! met,

frequently met, the hypertrophied offspring of a common professor of chemistry, a creature of no rank, no position, no wealth, and talked to him as though there were no Kings and Princes, no order, no reverence – nothing but Giants and Pigmies in the world, talked to him and, it was only too certain, held him as her lover" (*FG*, 244).

[28] The two radicals may have been inspired by Sacco and Vanzetti, the Italian anarchists who were arrested in 1920 and executed in 1927.

[29] *Gladiator* can be deemed as a semi-alternate-history novel since the events narrated occurred at least ten years before the time of composition, but those events are not reshaped in a significant way by the presence of the *novum* (i.e. Hugo).

[30] Other than *Gladiator* influencing the creation of *Superman*, another novel by Wylie is often credited as a possible inspiration for a popular comic strip: "*When Words Collide*, co-written with Edwin Balmer [in 1933], probably inspired *Flash Gordon* and perhaps also Superman's interplanetary origin story" (G. Jones 2015, ix).

[31] The definitive word on the subject may come from Jerry Siegel's almost-mythical unpublished memoir. Larry Tye, who cites it as a source in his *Superman: the High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*, claims that the "memoir was likely written in stages over the years, with two earlier versions being titled *The Story Behind Superman # 1* and *The Life and Times of Jerry Siegel.* While none of the three were published or made public, Jerry did register *Creation of a Superhero* with the Copyright Office of the Unites States in 1978, when he was living in Los Angeles. According to Gerard Jones, in this autobiography Siegel "wrote that he 'read and enjoyed Philip Wylie's book *Gladiator*' and that, along with a great many other pop-culture items, 'it influenced me, too.' (Courtesy of Thomas Andrae, author of *Creators of the Superheroes*)" (G. Jones 2015, iv). However, no further corroboration is provided. It is worth noting that in the surviving portions of *The Story Behind Superman # 1* no mention of *Gladiator* is made. The scans are available online at http://www.superman.nu/t/story_behind_superman_1/ (11 November 2016).

[32] By contrast, Feeley argues that "After carefully comparing all the various versions, I have concluded that Siegel and Shuster's Superman is more likely indebted to such costumed and fancifully-named crusaders as Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel than to Philip Wylie's melancholy and aimless figure, and that *Gladiator*-which, far from being the commercial success Moskowitz assumes, sold only 2,568 copies (Keefer 46) upon publication and was not widely read until an Avon paperback appeared in 1949-may not have been an influence at all" (2005, 179–80).

[33] For the sake of simplicity, I indicate Superman's stories with *AC*, if published in *Action Comics*, and *SM*, if published in *Superman*, followed by the issue number. Page numbers are from the most recent reprint collection, entitled *The Golden Age Superman* (Siegel and Shuster 2016). In a similar manner, I indicate DC for *Detective Comics,* with page numbers from *The Golden Age Batman* (Kane et al. 2016).

[34] "The Reign of the Super-Man" was published under the pseudonym Herbert S. Fine, "which was a combination of the names of one of my cousins and my mother's maiden name" (Siegel in Andrae, Blum, and Coddington 1983, 9). It was not Siegel and Shuster's first collaboration. They had already worked together on a humorous series of short stories entitled "Goober the Mighty", a parody of Tarzan (Daniels 1998, 11–12). Even though *Science Fiction* is a now a collector's item, "The Reign of the Super-Man" is widely available online (https://archive.org/details/ReignOfTheSuperman, 11 November 2016).

[35] Even though 'Superman' is hyphened in the title, it is written as a single word in the body text.

[36] A vague mistrust of investors and stockbrokers also characterises Siegel's subsequent Superman comic book, as in *AC*#11.

[37] Jerry Siegel claims that Ackerman had actually been a contributor to his fanzine *Science Fiction* (Siegel in Andrae, Blum, and Coddington 1983, 9)

[38] The term is here used to indicate both the general idea of "social dreaming" (Sargent 1994, 9), and the historically-determined notion of "great modernist myth of producing a radically new Utopian space capable of transforming the world itself" (Jameson 1991, 104).

[39] More precisely, I take into account *AC* monthly issues from #1 (June 1938) to #14 (July 1939), plus *SM*'s first issue (July 1939), and the 1939 *New York World's Fair Comics*, all written by Siegel and illustrated by Shuster. As for Batman, I examine *DC* issues from #27 (May 1939, Batman's first appearance) to #37 (March 1940), by various authors. Of both characters, I thus consider approximately first year of publication.

[40] For a thorough examination of the superhero's defining characteristics, see Coogan 2006, 30–60.

[41] The twofold concept of arthrology has been coined by Thierry Groensteen: "The elementary relations, of the linear type, compose what we will call the *restricted arthrology*. Governed by the operation of breaking down *(decoupage),* they put in place the sequential syntagms, which are most often subordinated to the narrative ends. It is at this level that writing takes priority, as a complementary function of narration. The other relations, translinear or distant, emerge from *general arthrology* and decline all of the modalities of *braiding (tressage).* They represent a more elaborated level of integration between the narrative flux […] and the spatio-topical operation, in which the essential component, as Henri Van Lier has named it, is 'the 'multiframe' (*multicadre*)"

(Groensteen [1997] 2007, 22 emphasis in the original). Graphiation "can be read as a neologism for 'visual enunciation' or 'graphic expression,' [and] refers to the fact that the hand and the body - as well as the whole personality of an artist - is visible in the way he or she gives a visual representation of a certain object, character, setting, or event" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 137). The term was coined by Philippe Marion in his *Traces en cases: Travail graphique, figuration narrative et participation du lecteur* (1993).

[42] I am aware of the problems that arise from defining comics a 'composite medium'. From an analytical standpoint, I in fact agree with Groensteen's claim that "To suppose that comics are essentially the site of a confrontation between the verbal and the iconic is, in my opinion, a theoretical counter-truth that leads to an impasse" ([1997] 2007, 8), and thus comics is to be considered as a "*predominantly visual narrative form*" (12, emphasis in the original). However, it is impossible to ignore that the overwhelming majority of comics simultaneously employ images and words, thriving off the tension between these two constitute elements (see Bavaro and Izzo 2008, 21).

[43] Geometrical structuration characterizes both buildings and streets. The latter aspect is particularly relevant in North American cities, often organized in a 'gridiron' scheme. As Bainbridge points out, "Of all cities, New York also seems the most suited for the comic page as New York City itself is structured around an abstract grid of buildings and streets just as the comic page is (most often) structured into grids composed of panels and gutters" (Bainbridge 2010, 168).

[44] It is worth pointing out that *Zerstreuung* both means 'something that diverts attention' and 'entertainment': "This positive idea of distraction […] contrasts with the negative idea of distraction that Benjamin developed in such essays as "Theater and Radio" (1932) and "The Author as Producer" (1934)" (Benjamin 2008, 54 n.33).

[45] The mental process that allows to read sequential syntagms is called 'closure'. Scott McCloud defines it as the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (1994, 63).

[46] As Schulte-Sasse points out, "The equation of the two terms stems from an inability to see that the theoretical emphases of modernist and avant-garde writers are radically different" (1984, xv).

[47] The "hidden dialectic" of comics and avant-garde would somehow represents itself, albeit in a more explicit manner, with Pop Art. As "an American avantgarde and the endgame of international avantgardism" (Huyssen 1986, 195), Pop famously carried out the fertile cross-contamination between high and popular culture – and, to a certain extent, the effacement of this distinction – also through the appropriation and aestheticization of comics. However, it would be unfair to see it as one-way cannibalization. Even though Warhol's and Lichtenstein's works would somehow equate the creative output of anonymous and underpaid cartoonists to Coke bottle and soup cans, they contributed to the repositioning of sequential art in a post-Wertham era (Baetens and Frey 2015, 41). At the same time, they suggested a series of rhetorical tactics that would be re-employed by comics and graphic novels' creators, like the "dualism of narrative content" and "appropriation as a suggestive and powerful visual tactic" (45).

[48] The notion of "grammatextuality" was elaborated by Jean-Gerard Lapacherie in 1984, and then reintroduced in media research by Terry Harpold. He writes, "I draw here on a terminology introduced by Jean-Gerard Lapacherie, who has stressed the need for a critical vocabulary for describing aspects of written and printed texts that are autonomous with regard to the reproduction of speech. In texts in which this autonomy is in evidence, he observes, the 'graphic substance' of the letter, line, and page, are foregrounded or are otherwise independent of the 'phonic substance' and discursive structures they may also represent" (quoted in Baetens and Frey 2015, 152–53).

[49] Considering that comics predates Cubism (see Gordon 1995, 50), it would be tempting to see the former as a possible influence on the latter (see J. Jones 2002). In this regard, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* Gertrude Stein describes Pablo Picasso as a comic strips reader. Remembering a 1907 meeting, she writes, "Oh I forgot to give you these, said Gertrude Stein handing Picasso a package of newspapers, they will console you. He opened them up, they were the Sunday supplement of american papers, they were the Katzenjammer kids. Oh oui, Oh oui, he said, his face full of satisfaction, merci thanks Gertrude, and we left" (G. Stein 1933, chap. 2). Picasso also directly experimented with sequential art. As Michael Schuldiner points out, "In 1903 he created a seven-panel comic strip biography of Max Jacob; in 1908, Picasso drew a small comic strip about his trip with Sebastia Junyer to Paris in which narrative was provided. However, Picasso's most important foray into the world of the comic strip was no doubt his 1937 etching and aquatint, *The Dream and Lie of Franco* [*Sueño y mentira de Franco*]" (2016, 7). This last work was created while Picasso was working on Guernica, with which it shows clear resemblances.

[50] As Lawrence and Jewett point out, one of the "crucial element[s] of the superhuman [is] rapid mobility, the most characteristic and coveted form of freedom in America, the ability to transcend space and time" (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 40).

51 The opening sequence can be viewed here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQgMqf8tV6Q (05 March 2017).

52 These passages also integrate the narrative into a culturally- and religiously-positioned discourse: "Superman's origin – sole survivor of a dying planet, blasted off into space in a rocket by his father in a final desperate act – has parallels with the Judaeo-Christian story of Moses as well as sun-god myths" (Locke 2005, 30; see also Arnaudo 2010, 15–78)

53 The connections between *WSW* and American Culture, and the way in which the novel articulates an Americanized vision of the future are outlined in Chapter 1.7.

54 This does not mean that the Golden Age *Superman*, for instance, was only read by male children or teenagers. Tye points out that the comic book had a mixed readership, and was enjoyed by girls and adults as well (2012, 37; see also Sabin 1993, 145; Zangari 2012b, 611). Beaty cites "readership surveys [demonstrating] that by the end of 1943, 95 percent of children aged eight to eleven and 84 percent of children aged twelve to seventeen read comics, while 35 percent of adults aged eighteen to thirty did the same" (2005, 106). Some of these comics were likely to be superhero comic books.

55 As Les Daniels points out, "The business with guns was troublesome, and after one more recurrence DC's editorial staff decided to disarm Batman as far as deadly weapons were concerned, lest youthful fans take arms against a sea of troubles" (1999, 31).

56 Nobody except, as predictable, African-Americans. Black people are rare if not entirely absent in Golden Age *Action Comics*. Superman repeatedly deals with non-white people or immigrants, like Stanislaw Kober, the crippled miner in *AC#3* who speaks in broken English: "Months ago we know mine is unsafe – but when we tell boss's foremen they say 'No-like job, Stanislaw? Quit!'" (39). However, African-Americans are simply not represented. To an extent, Superman's lack of interest in problems of the black community reflects the way in which the New Deal policies failed to dismantle racial discrimination, especially in the workplace (Borgognone 2013, 192–93).

57 The systematic edification of housing projects commenced during the New Deal, when the 1933 National Industry Recovery Act created the Public Works Administration (PWA). As Zinn points out, "Housing was built for only a small percentage of the people who needed it [...], but the sight of federally subsidized housing projects, playgrounds, vermin-free apartments, replacing dilapidates tenements, was refreshing" ([1980] 2015, 403)

58 The notion of comics' interdiegetic time has been proposed by Daniele Barbieri (1992, 55–56). He defines it as the time 'between' episodic narrations, as opposed to the time 'within' narrations (see also Lefèvre 2013, 264–65).

59 For an examination of the role of narrative closure in modern utopian fiction, see Fitting (1987).

60 In this regard, *DC#30* is quite emblematic. Bruce Wayne meets an old lady who claims to have lost all her money "in the depression" (34) and whose sole valuable property, a bunch of diamonds, has been stolen by Dr. Death. Batman proceeds with beating up Dr. Death and retrieving the diamonds. However, he does nothing to alleviate the condition of the woman, as Superman would probably have done.

61 This does not mean that New Deal stories entirely disappeared after *AC#13*. Lund mentions few in his analysis of Superman's politics (2016, 88–91). However, it is undeniable that overt left-wing political content became increasingly rare, until disappearing altogether, after the first year of serialization.

62 In the UK, the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act 1955 similarly prohibited "the printing, publishing, or selling of any work consisting wholly or mainly of stories told in pictures that was likely to fall into the hands of children which portrayed '(a) the commission of crimes; or (b) acts of violence or cruelty; or (c) incidents of a repulsive or horrible nature; in such a way that the work as a whole would tend to corrupt a child or young person into whose hands it might fall'" (Round 2013, 338).

63 For a thorough examination of Wertham's work, the CCA and the comic book scare see also Nyberg (1998) and Hajdu (2009). The website of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund also provides some useful information (http://cbldf.org, 10 December 2017).

Notes to Chapter 3

[1] I use the term 'book-length' only to indicate that graphic novels are generally longer than comic strips or 'floppies'. However, the book analogy is problematic for at least two reasons. First, because the phrase 'comic book' has been in use for decades to designate an editorial formal that is different from a 'book'. In the second place, "graphic novels need not to be in book form. They can exist as uncompiled part works, serials in magazines and papers, even in unpublished manuscripts" (Gravett 2005, 9).

[2] An analogous process took place in Italy as well, where 'alternative comics' magazines like *Cannibale* (1977) or *Frigidaire* (1980) featured authors as Stefano Tamburini, Andrea Pazienza, and Tanino Liberatore. More 'mainstream' comics were instead published in *Linus* (1965) and *Corto Maltese* (1983).

[3] As Paul Gravett points out, "The term novel can make people expect the sort of format, serious intent, and weighty heft of traditional literature, as if a graphic novel must be the visual equivalent of 'an extended, fictional work'" (2005, 8).

[4] Philip Wegner sees the spread of graphic novel form as "the modernist *moment* of the comics medium – that of its great *auteurs* and the emergence of a new self-reflexivity" (2010, 4).

[5] As for Batman, the situation is slightly more complex. The early tales only were credited to and signed by Robert Kane, even though it has been established that other writers and artist contributed to the realization. Despite Kane's own claims, it is now widely known that Batman was also created by Bill Finger, and that Gardner Fox wrote several of the early tales. DC Comics fully acknowledged Finger's contribution in 2015, when the character's boilerplate was changed in "Batman created by Bob Kane with Bill Finger". For a concise examination of the Batman's authorship, see Porter (2008). The website "Dial B for Blog" also provides some useful information: http://www.dialbforblog.com/archives/389/ (4 May 2017).

[6] The rediscovery and reprint of forgotten masters was a central preoccupation of the underground, as cartoonists looked for earlier sources of inspiration which had been obfuscated by mainstream comics.

[7] The cover of the comic book can be seen here https://www.comics.org/issue/75432/cover/4/?style=default (28 April 2017).

[8] As Derek Parker Royal suggests, "Although written as a 'graphic novel,' Eisner's *A Contract with God* could more accurately be called a 'graphic cycle' in that its narrative structure is based on four shorter stories, all linked by the common setting of a 1930s Bronx tenement house. In this way, the text shares more similarities with the short-story cycle than it does with the traditional novel" (2011, 151).

[9] According to Paul Williams, who consulted the Will Eisner Collection at Ohio State University, 6059 copies of the graphic novel had been sold by January 1980 (P. G. Williams 2015).

[10] Klock actually considers these two text as the "first instances of […] the revisionary superhero narrative, with *DKR* constituting "the first strong misreading of comic book history" (28). However, I would argue that *Watchmen* and *DKR* should be seen as the culmination of a sophistication process that had started at least in the seventies, or even before. Significant revisionist superhero comics had appeared before 1986, like Moore's own *Miracleman*, *V for Vendetta*, and *Swamp Thing*, serialized between 1984 and 1987. Serialization, with comics slowly being releases throughout the years, further complicates the identification of a forefather to the revisionary superhero narrative. In Klock's defense, it can be said that when his study was published, *Miracleman* was unavailable due to copyright issues, and thus the comic was virtually excluded from the canon (see 190).

[11] In 2003, after he had largely retired from mainstream superhero comics, Moore commented "I don't like nostalgia because I think it's unhealthy. Nostalgia is a clinging to the past as a kind of denial of the future… that's not healthy at all. On the other hand, taking energy from the past in order to create some sort of future… that seems to me to be valuable and a noble thing" (Moore in Martini 2003, 114).

[12] As Frank Miller argues in an interview in *The Comics Journal*, "What I'm trying to demonstrate in the *Dark Knight* series is that super-heroes do come from a good idea. By portraying the city in somewhat more realistic terms, and showing much more than I ever have of the way I think things actually happen in society, and why they happen, l want to show that the idea is good and strong and valuable" (Miller in K. Thomson 1985, 60)

[13] It can be argued that Moore moved to the reaffirmation of the superhero myth in a latter phase of his career, albeit in a different manner from Miller's. Moore's re-constructionist works include *1963* (1993), *Top Ten* (1999-2001), *Tom Strong* (1999-2006), and, most significantly, *Promethea* (1999-2005).

[14] "The modest goal of the present book is to present a different paradigm for recognizing the 'third movement' of superhero comic books and to avoid at all costs the temptation to refer to this movement as 'postmodern,' deconstructionist,' or something equally tedious" (Klock 2002, 2–3).

[15] Even though I only take into account writers, the importance of British artists as Dave Gibbons, Brian Bolland, and Dave McKean must not be underestimated.

[16] The notions of plausibility and cognition are here invoked in the sense proposed by Suvin, who argues that "the thesis of *any* SF tale has to conform to an 'ideal possibility'" rather than a 'real' one, "which is possible in the author's reality and/or according to the scientific paradigm of his [sic] culture" (1979, 66).

[17] I use anti-utopia in the meaning codified by Sargent, who defines it as a "non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia" (1994, 9)

[18] For a more extensive treatment of *Miracleman*'s editorial history, see Khoury (2001, 6–8) and Ó Méalóid (2013). For obvious chronological reasons, these recapitulations do not take into account the recent acquisition by Marvel Comics and the subsequent reprints.

[19] Direct import of American comics would not start until 1959, assumedly because of protectionist post-WW2 laws (see Sabin 1993, 31; Khoury 2001, 38).

[20] Quite ironically, Marvel Comics now owns the copyright of the character and has produced the recent reprint. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to Moore's (and Gaiman's) revision as *Miracleman,* leaving the name *Marvelman* to Anglo's 1954 character.

[21] Because of its incompleteness, Gaiman's story-arc is not discussed in this analysis.

[22] In a 2012 newsletter on Alan Moore, Ó Méalóid questions the authorship of the alterations: "I don't think Alan Moore actually had any part in that particular story appearing in Miracleman #1. It wasn't in Warrior #1, where the first part of the story originally appeared - as Marvelman - and it was gone again by the time Eclipse got around to publishing the first collected volume of Miracleman. My guess is that it was inserted by the editorial people at Eclipse to try to provide some sort of back-story for an American audience, and that Moore himself probably got it removed again in time for the TPB". The newsletter can be read here https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/alanmoore/conversations/topics/19585 (15 May 2017). Whoever the author might be, I believe that *Miracleman* prologue should be analyzed by virtue of its textual and thematic significance.

[23] Page numbers are taken from *Miracleman*'s most recent three-volume reprint, published by Marvel Comics. Since Moore does not want his name to be associated with *Miracleman*'s reprints, in the volume he is credited with the pseudonym "The Original Writer". Each volume covers a story-arc. The first is entitled *A Dream of Flying* (2014, hereinafter *DF*), the second *The Red King Syndrome* (2014, hereinafter *RKS*), and the third *Olympus* (2015).

[24] The genre is directly mentioned in *Miracleman*'s third book, when the hero is describing the eutopia he has created: "Airwalking, I patrol a futurist's Valhalla where old scientific romances, rejuvenated, live again" (*Olympus*, 36).

[25] I use "realistic mode" in the meaning codified by Witek. He defines it as a mode in which "the rendering of figures and objects adheres to (or at least points toward) the artistic conventions for creating the illusion of psychical forms existing in three-dimensional space. A significant effort is made to create that plausible physical world using shading, consistent lighting sources, texture, and linear perspective. Backgrounds are rendered in detail, especially in establishing shots, and that background tends to be depicted relatively fully from panel to panel" (2012, 31).

[26] I this regard, *Miracleman* can be seen as one of many postmodern "narrative voices (and bodies) that use memory to try to make sense of the past" (Hutcheon 1988, 118).

[27] The destruction displayed in Miracleman recalls the devastating effects of terrorism. Both events "turn the anomalous into physical reality. Blowing a hole in the very fabric of everydayness, they become an event that seems to exceed both the past and present" (Houen 2002, 14). However, the graphic novel exceeds the representational boundaries of terrorism, evoking a full-fledged war bombing or even a nuclear apocalypse. Robert Eaglestone sees this orgiastic display of violence as an allegory for the Holocaust: "barbed wire, torture, burnt bodies. Again, this is neither simple or easy '4-colour' superhero fare. This is half of Moore's reflection on the Holocaust: that it stems from the ideology of modernity – from the way it sacrifices the complexities of human decision making and justice to a seemingly objective technoscience" (2002, 326).

[28] Moore uses a similar premise in his *Swamp Thing* run. Here, it is revealed that the eponymous character is not a man transformed into a vegetable creature, but a plant that has formed a consciousness and believes to be human being (Moore, Bissette, and Veitch [1984] 2009, 49; see also Carney 2006, 7)

[29] I owe the idea of analysing Moore's graphic novels as historiographic metafiction to Annalisa Di Liddo, who exhaustively discusses it in her monograph on Alan Moore (2009, 62 and following).

[30] As Moore argues, "He [Moran] does not want to exist. His entire life has been ruined by it. He's lost his wife, he's lost everything. He's become a secondary figure in his own life" (Moore and Khoury 2001, 20).

[31] Miracleman's ecstatic dance evokes the mystical superhumanity described by Upton Sinclair in *The Overman* (see Chapter 2.3).

[32] Miraclewoman, i.e. Avril Lear, is a feminine equivalent to Miracleman created in secret by Gargunza, without the approval of the Spookshow.

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[33] The notion of bio-power (or biopower) has been developed by Michel Foucault, who (simplifying to the extreme) defines it as a mode of power that "gave itself the function of administering life, its reason for being and the logic of its exercise"(Foucault [1976] 1978, 138). Foucault argues that bio-power has historically taken two interrelated forms: "One of these poles […] centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines:* an *anatomo-politics of the human body.* The second […] focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*" (139, emphasis in the original).

[34] I use here dystopia in the meaning suggested by Sargent, i.e. "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (1994, 9). Another useful definition is provided by Suvin, who acknowledges the internal oppositions of the dystopian narrative. He in fact calls dystopia "a community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and relationships between its individuals are organized in a *significantly less perfect way* […] as seen by a representative of a discontented social class or fraction, whose value-system defines 'perfection'" (1998, 170, emphasis in the original).

[35] I owe the idea of considering *VfV* a critical dystopia to Emanuele Monegato, who discusses it in his *Anarchici (su carta)* (2014, 107).

[36] The quotation is from *Macbeth* 1.2.11-21, page 120–121 of New Cambridge edition (2008). Confronting *VfV* with the original passage, two considerations can be made. First, two lines are removed, probably because of pacing issues – "from the Western Isles / Of kerns and galloglasses is supplied" (12–13). Secondly, in the original passage the first "him" refers to "the merciless Macdonald", and not Macbeth. In the graphic novel, however, we are brought to think that the whole quotation refers to Macbeth, and thus indirectly to V, who is 'brandishing his steel'. The misattribution possibly hints to the ambiguous status of V, who is both the 'merciless' villain *and* the brave hero Macbeth, who ironically is later revealed to be equally villainous.

[37] The emergence of a secondary (tertiary, etc.) *novum*, and the possible coexistence of more than one *nova* has been dramatically understudied. Parrinder briefly considers the matter in *Revisiting Suvin's Poetics of Science Fiction,* in which he writes "Wells's *The Time Machine*, which is cited in 'SF and the Novum' as one of a group of works which are 'primarily fairly clear analogies to processes incubating in their author's epoch' (78), is a non-controversial example of an SF text involving a *novum*. (But if the future degeneration of the human species in Wells's text is both a *novum* and a reflexive analogy—that is, the Eloi and Morlocks confound Victorian expectations of progress—it is surely not the only *novum* in the story. Perhaps an extended SF narrative needs two or three *novums*? [*sic*])" (Parrinder 2000, 43).

[38] A full text of the act can be retrieved here http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/pdfs/ukpga_19880009_en.pdf (15 May 2017).

[39] An exhaustive list of *VfV*'s cultural references can be found online (Boudreaux 1994).

[40] The 'gardener' metaphor has a long history in British culture. One of the most famous examples, which arguably influenced the birth of the scientific romance, is in Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*: "Not only is the state of nature hostile to the state of art of the garden; but the principle of the horticultural process, by which the latter is created and maintained, is antithetic to that of the cosmic process. […] The tendency of the cosmic process is to bring about the adjustment of the forms of plant life to the current conditions; the tendency of the horticultural process is the adjustment of the conditions to the needs of the forms of plant life which the gardener desires to raise" (1895, 13).

[41] As Moore suggests in an interview, "The juxtaposition excited me – a creature of the past in the future. That eventually grew into V, who is an anachronism. He's into old films, all the old culture that's been eradicated. He quotes Shakespeare and Goethe. He is a lavish creature who doesn't fit these bleak backgrounds" (Lawley and Whitaker [1984] 2012, 32).

[42] As Call points out, *"V for Vendetta* retains the fondness for dialectical thinking which can be found in much of the 'scientific' anarchism of the nineteenth century" (Call 2008, 162).

[43] The idea of reorganizing society in a eutopian manner after an alien-induced catastrophe is suggested by the artilleryman's in *WWs* (see Chapter 1.6).

[44] In *Miracleman*, *VfV, and Watchmen* (but also in *Swamp Thing* and in the later *Promethea*), 'apocalypse' retains the etymological meaning of ἀποκάλυψις, i.e. 'revelation' (Cortsen 2014). The *Book of Revelation* of the New Testament prophesizes the catastrophes which culminate in the Second Coming of Christ, with "the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (*Revelation*, 21). Moore similarly sees the apocalypse as a disclosure of knowledge: "I […] project

various apocalypses, whether it's Kid Marvelman in London or whether it's Adrian Veidt's fake alien in New York. Whether it's the limited nuclear war that happens before the first issue of "V". These are all attempts to see human beings in the human world, to extrapolate people and the places that they exist in to some future extremity. Little thought expedients to see what happens to people in our culture – if this were to happen or that were to happen" (in Khoury 2003, 115). One could argue that V's terrorist acts are a sort of microcosmic re-presentation and re-enactment of "the limited nuclear war".

[45] The accusations are later revealed to be part of Ozymandias's plot to save the world: "Jon, being too powerful and unpredictable to fit my plans, needed removing" (*Watchmen*, 372). He then continues, "After Blake, I neutralized Jon. Stolen psychiatric reports indicated his mental withdrawal. The cancer allegations made it physical" (374).

[46] It is worth noting that Miracleman's Olympus is analogously compared to Versailles (*Olympus*, 104).

[47] Rorschach's psychiatric file at the end of the sixth chapter includes an essay written by a 11-year-old Walter Kovacs. The child idolizes his father, whom he has never met: "I think perhaps my dad was some sort of aide to President Truman, because he liked him so much. Most probably he was out of the country during the war when I was growing up on some sort of mission. I think he was the kind of guy who would fight for his country and what was right. Maybe he got killed fighting the Nazis and he's God now and that's how come he never managed to find me" (*Watchmen*, 209). He then adds, "I like President Truman, the way Dad would of [*sic*] wanted me to. He dropped the atom bomb on Japan and saves millions of lives" (*ibid.*).

[48] The idea of finding meaning in the reality's 'Fearful Symmetry' – the title of the fifth chapter, quoted from Blake's poem "The Tyger" – obviously jibes with the psychological test that gives Rorschach his name.

[49] If Rorschach and Ozymandias play the role of narrator, Dr. Manhattan represent the comics reader (Hoberek 2014, 48; see also Bernard and Carter 2005, 20). He perceives time in a non-linear manner, as the reader who is able to move back and forth throughout the panels and the narrative (see for instance *Watchmen*, 111–12). He is almost omniscient, but is not able to change the story that has been written by someone else: "Everything is preordained. Even my responses" (285). When Laurie accuses him to be "just a puppet following a script", he replies "We're all puppets, Laurie. I'm a just a puppet who can see the strings" (*ibid.*). At the end of the graphic novel, he announces that he is "leaving this galaxy for one less complicated" (409), mirroring the reader who after *Watchmen*'s complexity reverts to the facile escapism of conventional superhero comics.

[50] It should also be noted that the nine-panel grid also reminds of Steve Ditko's 1960s comics (Wolk 2007, 239), thus possibly reinforcing the link with Rorschach.

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