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From Superman to Superbland: The Man of Steel's Popular Decline among Postmodern Youth

Timothy Aaron Pevey

FROM SUPERMAN TO SUPERBLAND: THE MAN OF STEEL'S POPULAR

DECLINE AMONG POSTMODERN YOUTH

by

AARON PEVEY

Under the Direction of Chris Kocela

ABSTRACT

Although immensely popular with American boys upon his debut in 1938, Superman has gradually lost relevance with the postmodern generation. DC Comics has rewritten the character numerous times in an attempt to regain lost popularity, but the problem lies in an aspect of his character they refuse to alter – his invulnerability. Superman's invulnerable body was engineered to quell the fears America harbored towards technological progress, but his impervious physique now renders him obsolete. Boys in postmodern America, under the influence of post-Enlightenment body values, now connect with vulnerable comic book heroes whose bodies more closely match their own. This paper examines the sociological reasons for the shift in Superman's popularity by comparing the body values of 1938 with those of today, and concludes that while Superman might have succeeded as a modern hero, he fails as a postmodern one.

INDEX WORDS: Superman, body modification, body values, comic books, 1938

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Introduction

Superman debuted in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938. Publisher Jack Liebowitz,

lacking confidence in the blue clad hero created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster*,* printed a

cautious 200,000 copies, fearful of losing too much money. Selling for a mere ten cents,

the famous full-color cover, which depicts the Man of Steel holding a car over his head,

immediately caught the attention of young American boys nationwide (Figure i.1).

Dealers quickly sold out. By the seventh issue, the comic was selling half a million

copies (a number that would soon double), and by issue #11 it became obvious that

Superman was a star. He never left the cover again despite the fact that *Action Comics*

remained an anthology book, featuring such characters as Zatara the magician and Tex

Thompson, until as late as 1959. In 1939 Siegel and Shuster's creation was given the

highest honor DC Comics could bestow: he received his very own book. Entitled

Superman, it was the first comic book title ever devoted to a single character. The

superhero genre was officially born, and pop culture in America would never be the

same. The comic book historian Brandon Wright observes that Superman was much more

than a popular character in a children's book, he was "the ideal that spawned an industry"

(1). Not only did he pave the way for the superhero genre, he was the first – and most

successful – hero to make the transition from the paneled page to radio, television, and

film. In 1940, when most other comic books were selling 400,000 copies per issue,

Action Comics regularly topped 900,000, and *Superman* sold more than 1,300,000 per

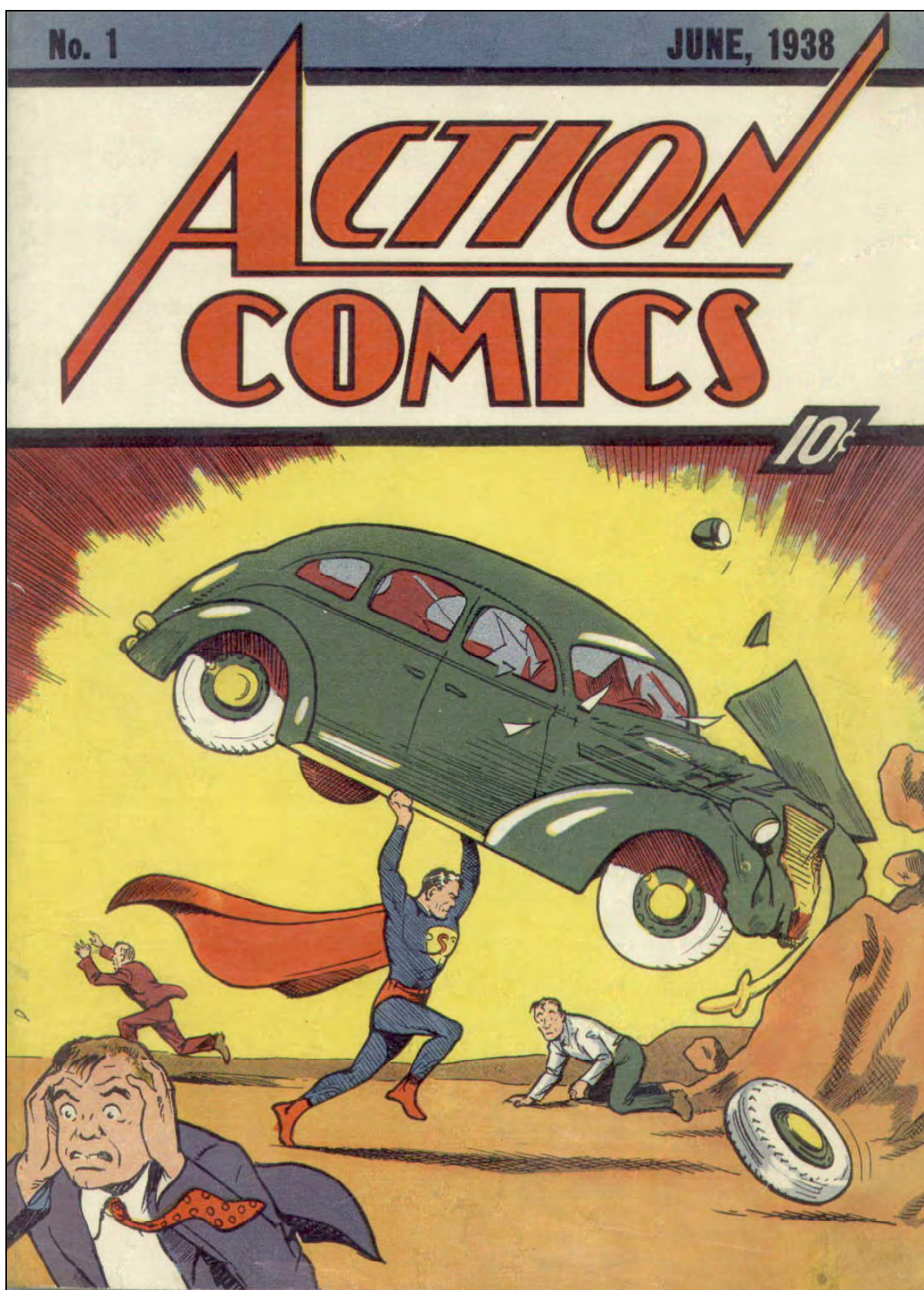issue. Superman would eventually go on to receive close to ten titles devoted solely to

Figure i.1 Superman amazed American readers in *Action Comics* #1, 1938. (Courtesy DC Comics)

himself or his friends, including *The Man of Steel*, *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*, *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen*, *Superboy*, and *Superman Family* among others.

In Superman, Siegel and Shuster created a myth that brought together the best aspects of popular Old West traditions and postindustrial social reform. As comic book defender Sidonie Gruenberg wrote in 1944, popular comics are merely reflections of "what millions are thinking about, what they want, what they fear, and how they feel about matters of social significance," and Superman was exactly that for Americans in the late 1930s and 1940s (213). He is the lone fighter willing to confront and unravel the diabolical machinations of politicians and businessmen, and fight "for the freedom of the individual to pursue his/her own destiny" (Eagen 89). He is the sole force that possesses the strength of will and body to stand against the rigors of the new machine age in which America found itself. Superman had no need for super-villains in those early years. He had his hands full foiling the schemes of the greedy and powerful heads of local municipalities. He was the hero who stayed very close to home; his primary concerns were not alien invasions, but domestic violence and governmental corruption. He brought heartland ideals into the big city, thereby speaking to small town and urban America simultaneously. No comic was more powerful than Superman in those first decades of the superhero industry, and while Siegel and Shuster were at the helm Superman comics were a focused, energetic series of social texts.

The astronomical sales figures Superman comics obtained during the 1940s, though, are a thing of the past. The entire comic book industry never regained the monstrous popularity it enjoyed from 1938 to 1955, a time referred to as the Golden Age[1]

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[1] See Appendix A: Comic Book Terminology

of comics. Currently, Superman has three on-going solo titles (*Action Comics*, *Superman,* and *All Star Superman),* and one on-going team-up title (*Superman/Batman*). The 2002-2006 sales years show Superman's top solo title selling an average of 75,000 copies per issue per month, roughly 109,000 copies less than each month's #1 selling comic book[2].

Despite slowly declining sales figures, this brightly clad urban avenger is so culturally pervasive that it is now impossible to grow up in this country and not know who Superman is. In the Mt. Rushmore of popular culture, his face is carved right next to mom's apple pie and the flag: that dark hair with the spit curl is unmistakable. But while he is embedded, perhaps permanently, into the mind space of Americans he no longer truly reigns as the ideal hero for teenage boys. Though culturally prominent, Superman finds himself taking a backseat among American teenagers to heroes whose personality, powers, and motivations are fractured, imperfect, and dubious.

DC Comics, the company that produces and publishes Superman's titles, is acutely aware that their flagship character is in trouble, so much so, that in the spring of 2002 they hired famed comic book writer Mark Waid to "re-imagine Superman for the twenty-first century" (Waid 5). While conducting research for the book, Waid discovered that in the minds of today's young males, "the stars and profiles of Batman, Spider-man and Wolverine have risen [and] Superman has become increasingly irrelevant" (Waid 5). Superman is, Waid realized, a modern hero attempting to fight in a distrustful postmodern world.

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[2] Sales figures acquired from www.ICv2.com, an industry website specializing in analyzing market trends to aid retailers. The explanation behind their calculations is reprinted in Appendix B.

Umberto Eco, in his 1962 article "The Myth of Superman," begins by listing all of Superman's characteristics found so appealing by the public: "He is kind, handsome, modest, and helpful; his life is dedicated to the battle against the forces of evil; and the police find him an untiring collaborator." While these aspects might have been comforting in 1962, they do not help him gain readers now. A quick survey of the current best selling comic books shows the lack of such characteristics in the heroes currently popular with American teenagers. Wolverine: a homicidal, feral, brutish half-beast. Batman: a paranoid, schizophrenic, brooding loner. Spider-man: a guilt-ridden, wisecracking teenager. Waid and DC, after conducting extensive research, concluded teens saw Superman as silly in comparison to other heroes. Writing about his findings, Waid notes that, to young males, "Superman is about as meaningful and significant as Woody Woodpecker or Amos 'n' Andy" (5). The Superman re-imagined by Waid in a graphic novel entitled *Superman: Birthright*, attempted to reach youth by re-telling the story of Clark's formidable early years before he was Superman, in order to demonstrate how his powers alienate him from humankind. In other words, Waid tried to show that Clark's body was a burden, not a gift, a theme with which the current generation of readers connects. Waid's series, however, was critically acclaimed but did not significantly increase Superman's comic book sales nor rekindle a waning fan base.

Currently, the most popular comic book in the country is Marvel's *New Avengers*, having spent nearly every month in one of the top three sales spots since its debut over a year ago. The large sales figures of this comic are a testament to the popularity of the heroes it features. As little more then a clever consolidation of Marvel's biggest assets,

New Avengers brings together Wolverine, Spider-man, Iron Man, and Captain America to do battle with monsters and each other's egos.

In response to the growth experienced by Marvel's *New Avengers* and Ultimate line – a separate series of titles that reboots all of Marvel's major characters – as well as the failure of past Superman re-write projects, DC began production on the movie *Superman Returns* several years ago with the intent of resurrecting the character's film and comic book franchise. In this film, Superman returns to Earth after a five-year journey to the remains of Krypton to discover that humans have grown suspicious of his motivations and leery of his presence. We find that not only has Earth's alien champion been rejected by the unwashed masses, he has also been spurned by his one true love, Lois Lane, who, in his absence, has won a Pulitzer for an editorial entitled "Why The World Doesn't Need Superman." The movie's plot is a thinly disguised attempt to ask whether or not a modern hero such as Superman has any place in a cynical, postmodern society. In essence, DC wants to know why the world does not seem to care the way they once did about the Man of Tomorrow.

How did the greatest hero of our country fall so far? What could have changed among American youth to connect them with heroes so very unlike Superman in any way? The curiosities surrounding Superman's current troubles constitute the crux of my project. I wish to examine why The Man of Steel has become an also-ran to today's youth. DC Comics has decided, as a company, to overhaul Superman's story several times since the 1970s, but it is my argument that Superman's unpopularity is based upon a trait fundamental to his myth – his invulnerability – and DC could not possibly change this trait without altering the character beyond recognition. For the sake of simplicity I

will focus my study on his comic book titles and newspaper strips alone, as they have always produced the canonical storylines and character changes on which Superman's other media incarnations are based. Also, although there have been an enormous number of writers that have worked on Superman titles over the years, the massive changes I will examine are dictated by the publisher, and it is therefore not important to classify and discuss negligible personality or visual alteration made by the writers.

When presenting his research findings to DC, Waid boiled down Superman's problem to its essence: "how inspirational is an invulnerable alien to young people who are taught that the moral visionaries and inspirational figures […] got the same reward for their efforts: a bullet and a burial" (5)? Waid implied that readers were attempting to make a connection to Superman's physical form in ways unintended by the character's creators. It is Superman's invulnerability that keeps him at arm's length from modern readers not his strict moral code or refusal to kill. Even though Waid correctly identifies a correlation between Superman's invulnerability and his declining popularity, neither he nor DC explored this notion. By analyzing what cultural forces were at work in the early twentieth century and comparing them with the cultural forces affecting the development of personhood in postmodern American, I intend to discover why Superman's inability to be hurt, scared, bruised, or maimed does not relate to how teenage boys form a sense of self. It is from the body that a boy feels, senses, and learns, and it is through the body that he assimilates this information to form an intellectual and spiritual identity. Superman's impervious physique strikes exactly the wrong chords with post-Enlightenment body norms. Instead of acting as wish fulfillment for the twenty-first century, he is now simply seen as foreign and impossible. His body denies him the ability to look at an old

scar and reminisce about a near defeat or a rescue mission gone wrong. This perfection becomes his ultimate limitation, barring him from composing an identity and personal history based around his physical form.

I cannot, though, properly explore the topic of changing Western body norms and their relation to identity formation without placing my analysis inside a theory of historical causation. What exactly has changed to drive postmodern youth towards scarred heroes, while youth in the 1940s had no such trouble embracing an impervious one? The answer lies, I suggest, in a slow decay of a sense of history that has occurred in America over the last century, and a changing view of the body in relation to a sense of self.

The innovation of the early twentieth century fostered in Americans new attitudes concerning science and technological advancement. Words were appropriated to refer to the new way of life science and technology would soon make possible. "Progress" became a positive thing, a thing we, as a nation, needed in order to survive. "Modern" was used in excess to describe the early 1900s, a time when the world was "dramatically different from any that had ever been" (Lienhard vii), yet fear and uncertainty surrounded the scientific discoveries being made. What would the new technology bring? Would it be more than man could handle? The mad scientist, who would use chemistry and science for destructive and selfish reasons, became the villain of choice for movies and radio drama. What was needed was a hero who could straddle the fence between traditional values and the unknown future, a hero who could, by himself, overpower any run-away technology, science, or super-smart evildoer. This hero was Superman, and his ability to physically confront any technological danger the twentieth century could throw at him

made him uniquely suited to meet the needs of the time. Dubbing him "The Man of Tomorrow," Siegel and Schuster knowingly aligned Superman with all that is new and modern while simultaneously disparaging that which is not. In short, Siegel and Schuster permanently divorced their character from any sense of history by forcing him out of his birthplace, and by making him physically perfect. His "invulnerable body" became an icon for "a country dedicated to propositions of progress and the 'new' " (Bukatman 197). Superman, a being whose body was specifically created to withstand the rigors of a machine driven world, became, for teenage boys, a representation of future America where man and machine worked in harmony together.

John H. Lienhard, in his book, *Inventing Modern: Growing Up with X-Rays, Skyscrapers, and Tailfins*, explores the notion that modernism found cultural expression through outward, visual means. Even the title of his book hints at his conclusions: it was streamlined architecture, the speeding cars, and giant buildings reaching toward heaven that signaled to America the coming of a new order. Modernity, Lienhard claims, was "a product of new technology" (vii). Critical theorist Frederic Jameson agrees and writes that modernism "thought compulsively about the New and tried to watch its coming into being" (xi). Superman fits into this cultural scene perfectly. He is bright, big, and flashy. He is the mobile, visible symbol of man's salvation from his own technology and fears about the future. Thus, to buy Superman comics in 1938 was to understand the transitional phase America found itself in while still sensing the need for a leader to guide us successfully through this sea of uncertainty to the other side.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, distrusts the very expressions and hopes in which modernism took comfort. "Postmodernism is what you have when the

modernization process is complete," writes Jameson (ix). The "utopia of tomorrow" America wished for in 1938 never came to pass. The futuristic longing that found its way into architecture and achieved greater expression at the 1939 New York World's Fair eventually gave way to disappointment and uncertainty. All the technology and good intentions in the world could not prevent World War II, the death of JFK, Vietnam, or the shake up in traditional culture caused by feminism, youth movements, and rock 'n' roll. It is postmodernism, Jameson asserts, "that looks for breaks, for events rather than for new worlds" (ix). It is this sentiment that is embraced by postmodern comic book heroes. It is not the world at large with which contemporary comics are concerned. Instead, it is the inner world of the individual to which postmodern heroes speak. Paranoia about (and discussions of) the body and selfhood consume the majority of popular comic book titles.

It is in relation to this postmodern model of American culture that I wish to position my argument. Our nation's tendency to tear down the old to make way for the new has had the slow and steady effect of wiping out our history one building at a time. America's obsession with the New has created "an age that has forgotten to think historically in the first place" (Jameson ix). Thus today's teenagers, reared to participate in our consumer culture, a culture that renews its product line and merchandise constantly, long for some visceral connection to their past. Heroes such as Wolverine, Batman, and Spider-man, who are driven by their past while constantly accumulating historical "markers" on their body in the shape of scars and bruises, speak loudly to a swarm of young men who are looking for a history in which to take part. Superman, no matter how well written he may be, seems unable to achieve such a place in the hearts of these young men.

In order to fully explore Superman's predicament, this paper will begin, in Chapter One, by examining Superman historically. Beginning in the 1970s, DC embarked on what would become a slow, steady stream of revisions to Superman's back-story, powers, and supporting cast. These revisions appeared casually at first, with a few of Superman's titles attempting change in the 1970s while others stuck with the campy, science-fiction plots that permeated his comics in the 1950s and 1960s. Through each successive attempt, Superman was tweaked, almost blindly, as DC worked to recapture the formula that made him a social cornerstone in 1938. Comic book companies simultaneously publish hundreds of titles, comprised of thousands of characters, and keeping their universes consistent and orderly is a daunting task. Wholesale rewrites of a universe are not uncommon, and in the case of DC, they were willing to sacrifice popular supporting characters time and time again to adjust Superman's mythology, hoping to strike gold. For this reason, an explanation of Superman's history can be surprisingly complicated, and much more than a few pages are necessary to understand what changed and when. To those unfamiliar with comic books, a single character with as much cultural penetration as Superman can appear to be an unchanging entity. In some respects, this is true. Superman's costume, for instance, has managed to remain virtually identical since his inception, but little else has. By providing an overview of each planned, orchestrated rewrite, the discussion of Superman's cultural importance as well as his lukewarm reception today will be given a firm grounding.

Chapter Two addresses American life in the early twentieth century, examining the cultural forces and conditions encountered by teenage boys in the late 1930s, how these forces impacted their view of themselves, and how Superman, as cultural product,

was equipped with the traits needed to address these forces. Enormous technological advances at the turn of the century incited a dramatic shift in how people saw the future and themselves. Paranoia concerning the misuse of science arose in the public consciousness alongside hope that technology would produce a utopia. These sentiments, which highlighted humankind's genius and fragility simultaneously, affected American boys in very specific ways. At home and at the work place they found themselves assaulted by the machine age. In their bedroom, boys were treated to a bevy of books excitedly detailing the scientific breakthroughs that would propel Western society forward. Many of these books offered step-by-step instructions on how to construct technological marvels (including X-Ray machines, combustion engines, etc) to enable one to become part of the scientific revolution. Out of the house, many boys also had to procure some kind of work. In the early twentieth century, child labor was common, and injury rates were high, most of them due to new machinery with little or no safety precautions. The dangers and fears inherent in this time period led to an insecurity in humankind's ability to confront his/her own creations should they go awry. Superman helped relieve this fear, and Chapter Two illustrates how Superman's physical form was the answer the scientific age needed.

Chapter Three moves into twenty-first century America, examining the body norms prevalent in society today and how they contrast with those of the 1940s. Seeing physical bodies as conduits for personal narrative is a topic modern scholarship has heavily focused on since the mid 1980s. Authors such as Mike Featherstone have proposed that "body projects" (tattoos and piercing) are attempts to "construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity through attention to the body" (53).

This process of body modification, considered by traditional America to be nothing more than a method of rebellion, is now understood to be a dialog with one's physical form, which is itself a person's link to the corporeal universe. Body projects are now looked at through the eyes of youth that believe "through the body and in the body [a] personal identity is to be forged and selfhood sustained" (Benson 236). Traditionally, teenage boys have focused on such things as running, working out, diets, etc. in order to manipulate and change the way their body is perceived by themselves and others. More recently, the act of tattooing and piercing has been made popular as a means of inscribing on oneself a personal history. Mary Douglas argues that cultures which "develop bodily symbolism may be seen to use it to confront experiences with [their] inevitable pains and losses" (120). Superman, unable to even shave with a razor due to the strength of his Kryptonian hairs, is especially ill-equipped to speak to the modern teenager who desires to tell a story through their body, or to record personal moments in time through tattooing or piercing. In Superman's place, characters that can feel pain, such as Batman, have steadily risen in popularity. My final chapter examines the cultural reasons for this shift in body values, and concludes that, while other current popular characters, such as Marvel's X-Men succeed, Superman is an inevitable failure as a modern hero in a postmodern culture.

Chapter 1: A History Of Revision

Nearly every American can recite Superman's origin story. The details of his interstellar travel from Krypton and of his adoption by the Kents are both factually simple and emotionally satisfying, making it easy for all who hear the story once to know it forever. Who would not like to start completely over in a new place? Who has not somehow felt like a complete outsider wishing he were like everyone around them?

It comes as a surprise to most people, then, to learn that the details concerning Superman's life, powers, and history have undergone extensive revision multiple times since his inception. Economically speaking, this fact alone is not shocking. Companies are constantly updating their merchandise to appeal to current fads and comic books are no exception. Rewriting or revisiting a superhero's past is big business. In 2000, Marvel Comics released *Ultimate Spider-Man*, the first title in their line of comic books called Ultimate Marvel. Set in a separate universe from the rest of Marvel's titles, the Ultimate line was designed to retell the history of every Marvel hero without the continuity baggage the characters had accumulated over the last several decades. *Ultimate Spider-Man* was such a success that *Ultimate X-Men* and *Ultimate Fantastic Four* debuted the following year. Ultimate Marvel is now comprised of four ongoing titles with a fifth in the works. The Ultimate line now generates a significant amount of Marvel's comic book sales, and has become, by any standard, a genuinely successful attempt to reintroduce popular characters to a young audience.

Marvel has also instituted minor tweaks within the Ultimate titles to try and keep its characters (most of whom were invented in the early 1960s) fresh for teenagers.

Spider-man, for instance, is bitten by a genetically altered spider (instead of a radioactive

one) in *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000), and he can manufacture organic webbing that

shoots from his wrists instead of having to mix up "webbing fluid" from a chemistry set[3].

But where Marvel has succeeded DC has struggled. In an effort to keep abreast of

changing tastes and attitudes in youth culture, Superman's publisher has injected a steady

stream of changes into their main character's mythos, but none of them has performed as

DC intended. In fact, many would argue that the ever growing number of minor tweaks to

Superman's powers, personality, and background hasx only mired the story in a muddy,

tangled fictional universe that bears little resemblance to the Man of Steel from 1938.

Despite disappointing rewrite attempts, though, DC has consistently churned out

refreshed versions of The Man of Steel, confident that each attempt will yield additional

readers, increased market share, and a return to prominence for America's once greatest

hero. Ever since the early 1970s, DC has altered the particulars of Superman's past,

powers, friends, and personality. Since *Superman* #233, DC has spun out a "new and

improved" version of The Man of Tomorrow nearly once a decade. The publishing

history of Superman's comics reveals DC's trial and error approach to his past. The

writers and editors at DC are desperate to supply their most recognizable character with a

suitable personal history, and have struggled with perfecting the story of Superman's

early life in the hope of convincing teenagers they should relate to him. This editorial

obsession stands in stark contrast to the values held by the character's creators. Siegel

and Shuster saw Clark Kent as an immigrant who had left his old life behind to make a

new one for himself on Earth. They were, surprisingly enough, content to keep

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[3] The 2002 movie, *Spider-man*, copied Ultimate Spider-man's history of the character as opposed to the classic origin, devised in 1962.

Superman's origins to a bare minimum, using only a single page with seven panels in

Action Comics #1 (Figure 1.1) to retell how this super man arrived on our planet[4]. It was

not until "The Origin of Superman" appeared in *Superman* #53 in 1948, after Siegel and

Shuster had left DC comics, that any detailed history made its way into the comic book.

Even then, it would not be until *Superman* #146 in 1961 that a story would promise to

answer all of the questions regarding the character's origin. The story was called "The

Complete Story of Superman's Life" (emphasis DC comics) and the cover of the comic

book proclaimed that it would, once and for all, answer everything about how Superman

came to Earth and how Kryptonite can destroy him.

Naturally, as a pop culture character gains popularity, the public demands

explanations of how he became who he is. Interestingly enough, though, Siegel and

Shuster never felt this was necessary despite Superman's astronomical sales figures and

high popularity when they were authoring his comic titles. They had crafted an immigrant

figure whose desire was to fit into American culture as an American. His

history, to them, was unimportant. It is interesting to note that the only thing capable of

harming Superman is Kryptonite, a piece of his old home world. It is only with pain and

suffering that Superman deals with his past, and it is in his best interest to run as far from

any physical remains of his past as possible. When he is separated from fragments of

Krypton his strength and abilities in the New World know no bounds, yet when he

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[4] In 1939 there was a series of twelve Sunday morning comic strips in the newspaper that detailed Jor-El and Lora's last days on Krypton. The story followed them, the launching of the rocket, and its arrival on Earth. It then skipped all of Superman's boyhood and ended with the same panels as in Figure 2.2.
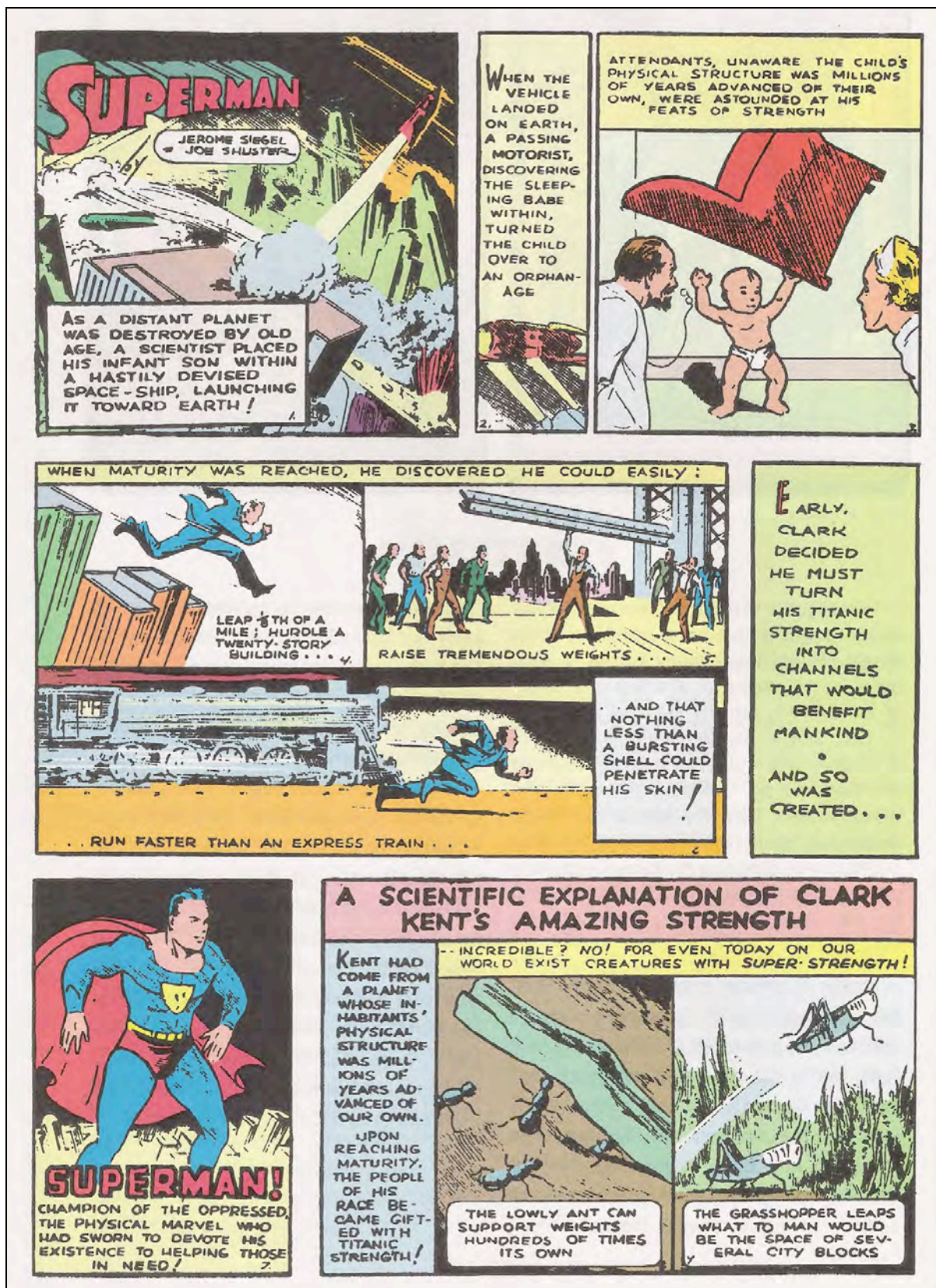
Figure 1.1 This seven panel spread provided Superman's history in *Action Comics* #1. (Courtesy DC Comics)

interacts with these remnants his abilities fall below an average human's. What was important to Siegel and Shuster was not Superman's past, but what he was doing for the people *now*, and how he was making America a better place to live.

Since the mid 1980s, in fact, there have been four major, sweeping projects to redefine Superman for the current generation of teenagers. For DC to make such a large gamble so often with the most recognizable hero in the world speaks volumes about the company's desperation. What follows is a walk-through of the various rewrites DC has attempted to implement. I will discuss their distinctions from each other, the aspects of the Superman mythos they wished to emphasize, and why they all ultimately failed to achieve success. Once a background is established, it will be easier to discuss the sociological reasons for the character's current situation.

1938-1985

Until the early 1960s Superman titles seemed immune to recession. In 1954, the comic book industry lost many readers when the Comics Code Authority was created, but Superman, at least initially, managed to weather this crisis. The CCA was a regulatory body created in response to the violent crime and horror comics that had become popular during the 1950s[5]. Intended to force comic book publishers to censor the gruesome topics and art that had horrified parents, the code had the unintended effect of sanitizing the comic books just as competition was entering the market. Enacted as television and rock music were siphoning the attention and pocket change of teenage boys away from printed media, the comics code deprived publishers of the creative latitude they had once

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[5] A detailed discussion of the Comics Code and its impact on the industry can be found in *Seal of Approval: History of the Comics Code* by Amy Kiste Nyberg.

enjoyed. DC Comics, operating under their own internal content revue system since 1941, found its books affected much less than their competitors. As a result, they muscled through the comic book sales dip of the 1950s rather well. Superman titles were the mainstay of the company, selling roughly one million copies per issue, even in this time period[6].

Yet, Superman had not escaped completely unscathed. Writers no longer had the freedom to depict heroes or criminals engaged in disputes with established authorities, effectively undermining much of the potential for social commentary Siegel and Shuster designed into their Superman character. As a result, there were severe alterations made to his character, changes that would contribute to the steady social decline he began to experience in the early 1960s. Superman was created as a champion of the oppressed, and his original stories focused on his outwitting such generic, no-name evildoers as a factory owner, mine foreman, or corrupt mayor. In Siegel and Shuster's original vision there was hardly any need for super villains. Superman had enough on his plate simply keeping corporate America in line and pushing for social reforms. His powers, though phenomenal, served only to make him stronger than the machines of war or politics that were used to intimidate the under-classes. Whether Superman could move a planet out of orbit or not was not vital to the narrative. Perhaps it was possible, but it certainly was not necessary.

After Superman's original writers left DC, creative control went to editor Mort Weisinger. Under his supervision, Superman ballooned from an important social text to an industry with dozens of spin-off titles capable of capitalizing on the Superman craze

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[6] Wright, 182.

sweeping the country. Weisinger sensed America's never-ending hunger for all things Kryptonian and he fed it. Over the course of a decade, Superman's powers grew to such preposterous levels that it was no longer feasible to write stories that centered on his aiding under-privileged people. Superman, by the end of Weisinger's term, could fly through a sun and even travel through time under his own power. With abilities this staggering, the entire direction of the Superman comics strayed from their well-intentioned, humble origins. Clark Kent, for example, would no longer need to investigate why a political project to rebuild a ghetto had stalled; Superman could rebuild the entire neighborhood single handedly in one hour. Weisinger's staff had written themselves into a corner. Superman had become too powerful either for any single villain or for DC's authors. His stories soon became campy fair such as "Superman's Saddest Day," a story that centers on Jimmy Olsen's need to collect one of Superman's tears[7]. Eventually, Weisinger's staff began writing "what if" tales about the hero, as this was the only way of incorporating dramatic elements into the storyline. In these made up worlds, Superman could die, get married, or give up crime fighting completely without having any effect on the canonical universe. These stories sold well throughout the fifties and much of the early sixties, but by 1962 – when Spider-man debuted – DC's inability to write compelling, pathos driven stories for Superman affected his sales figures.

By 1960, the state of Superman was a reflection of the general attitude towards comics at DC. In lieu of an entwined universe populated by many superheroes, each having an effect on the other, DC opted for sensationalism. The lack of progressive, intricate, character driven storylines and an emphasis on cookie cutter personalities

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[7] *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* #125 1969

backfired as anti-establishment sentiment began to blossom among youth culture. The DC pantheon (which included Green Lantern, The Flash, Batman, Wonder Woman and Superman) was an artist's representation of upper class America, a representation that fit the mindset of the 1950s but was oddly out of place with the more liberal sixties. Each DC hero was a clean, handsome, emotionally sound example of an American citizen; each respected government, lived in areas populated by look-alike white men and women, and operated for the sole purpose of helping his fellow American. These heroes "were always in control, rarely impulsive, and never irrational" (Wright 185). Ulterior or selfish motives were anathema to the elder statesmen of the comic book universe.

Sensing discontent growing in America's youth over the comic book material available for purchase, Marvel Comics changed the industry forever when, in the early sixties, they created their most popular characters. In three short years, the publishing company trumped DC by introducing America to the Fantastic 4 (1961), Spider-man (1962), The X-Men (1963), and The Avengers (1963), all heroes that revolutionized comics. With a focus on continuous story, teenage angst, and personality clashes, Marvel brought new depth to individual superheroes.

Amidst this shuffle, the morally righteous hero from Krypton, who had once tapped a vein in America, began, for the first time, to wane in popularity. The following decade would see Marvel snag the crown from DC as the industry's most profitable and popular publisher. Marvel's focus on flawed, vulnerable heroes stood in direct contrast to the very idea behind Superman. He was a product of a post-Depression era America: a being invulnerable to harm and thus able to ceaselessly fight for the downtrodden without ever second-guessing his own motivations. Moreover, Superman embodied traditional

Western values in relation to the body and one's sense of self. Marvel's popularity, by contrast, derived from tapping into youth's growing cynicism towards universally held guidelines, including traditional body norms.

As Marvel's fledgling comics found their stride and grew in popularity, DC began to institute small changes in Superman's comics in order to keep up. For a brief time the Daily Planet had a new owner, Clark Kent became a TV news anchor instead of a reporter, and *Superman #233* in 1971 (Figure 1.2) introduced the "new" Man of Steel as immune to Kryptonite. Editor Julius Schwartz failed to oversee the direction of the other comics featuring Superman, so any changes implemented by his team for *Superman* went unheeded by the rest of the company and subsequently failed to catch on. As Marvel's market share grew, the pressure on DC led them to plan a massive overhaul of Superman in 1985.

The John Byrne Era (1986)

By the mid 1980s, comic book author John Byrne had achieved fame as a savior for wayward titles. His work with Chris Claremont on *Uncanny X-Men* from 1977 to 1981 revived the slow selling series and transformed it into a powerhouse that would eventually spawn three full-length feature films. He was exactly the kind of writer DC was looking for. Contacted by DC after his tenure with Marvel Comics ended, he was offered the job of re-imagining Superman from the ground up. This was to be the most drastic revision in the history of comics, and Byrne was given free reign.

In 1985 DC published *Crisis On Infinite Earths*, a twelve issue series that restructured the entire DC universe, impacted every character, and killed off several well-
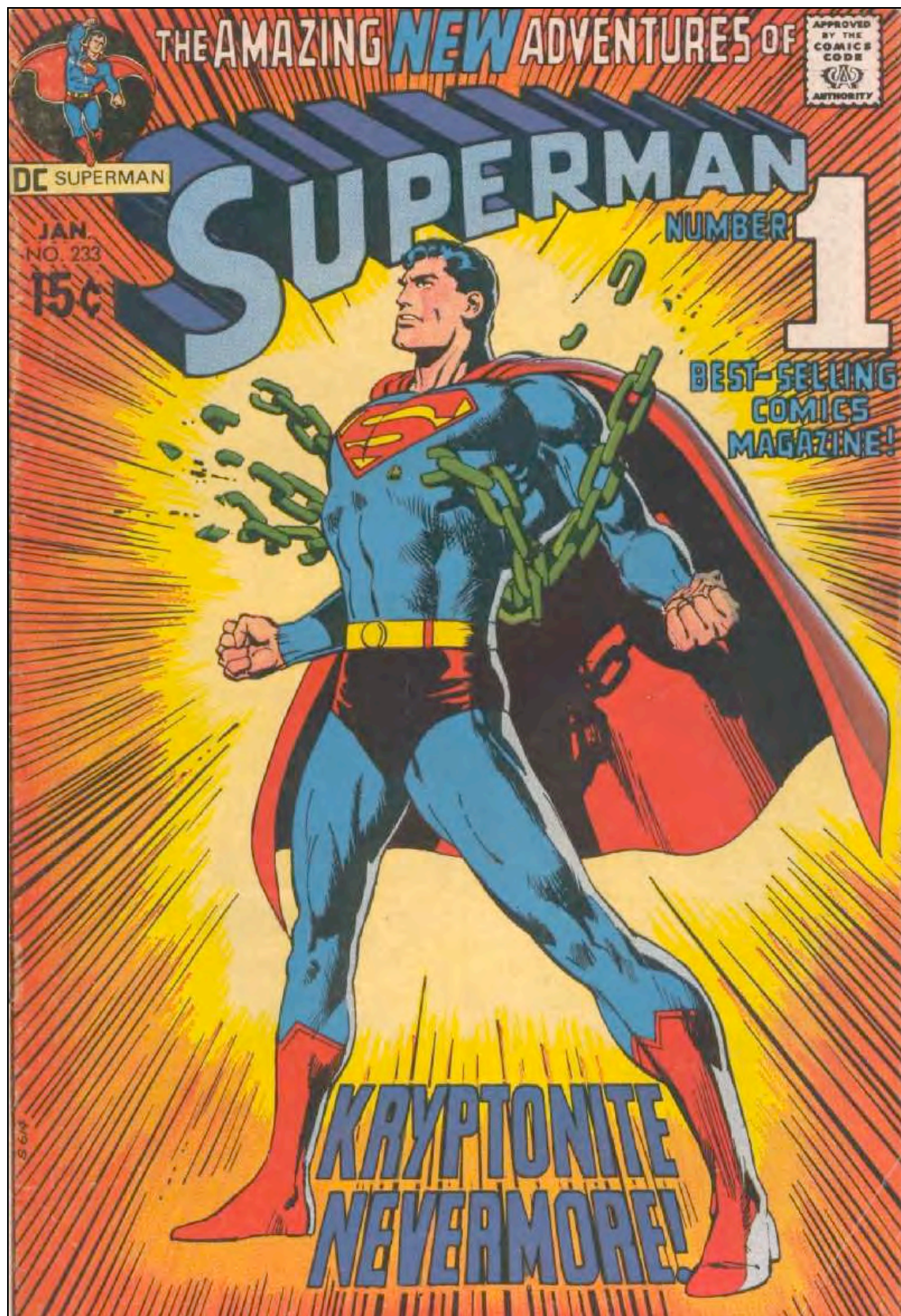
Figure 1.1 DC unveiled a slightly re-vamped Superman in 1971. (Courtesy DC Comics)

known heroes. It had been previously established that the reality in which DC's comics were set was comprised of multiple universes. This "multi-verse" consisted of an endless number of planet Earths, each having its own heroes and villains. Earth-Prime, for example, was the designation for our world, where superheroes are fictitious. Earth-1 held the contemporary version of DC's characters, and on Earth-2 the heroes of the Golden Age operated. The list goes on and on, even including a mirror world where all the heroes are villains and vice versa. The objective of the series was to trim this confusing reality down, making DC comics more accessible to new readers in the process. To do so, the plot for *Crisis on Infinite Earths* involved the destruction of every Earth in the "multi-verse" save Earth-1. The implications for Superman were severe and often met with public disapproval. The original Superman written by Siegel and Shuster, known by the Kryptonian name Kal-L, was said to have existed on Earth-2 with the remainder of the Golden Age heroes. After *Crisis* finished its run, readers discovered Earth-2 had been obliterated, thereby killing off the "original" Superman. In his place, the Superman of Earth-1, Kal-El, became the protagonist of the Superman books, and Earth-1 itself became the theater in which every DC comic book would take place from then on.

Into this convoluted narrative stepped John Byrne, whose job it was to modernize the Man of Steel. His contribution hit newsstands in 1986 immediately after the last issue of *Crisis* was published. Entitled *The Man of Steel*, it was a six-issue mini-series designed to introduce the new, post-Crisis Superman to the world, using the effects of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* as an explanation for the sweeping changes. Fully aware that young readers saw Superman as campy, DC leveraged their newfound narrative freedom to mold Superman into what they thought modern readers wanted. The company hoped that

by stepping away from what Superman had become during the Silver Age, by stripping him of some of his god-like powers, they could produce a more sympathetic character. Unlike his pre-Crisis counterpart, the new Kal-El was the only survivor of Krypton. Supergirl, his Kryptonian cousin, was erased from continuity, as was the Fortress of Solitude and Krypto the Superdog. Kryptonite now only came in a single color (green), and there was a limited supply – a single chunk of it, to be exact, owned by Lex Luthor. Also, in Byrne's version, Clark Kent did not don the tights until his late twenties, eliminating Superboy from the canon. The primary change, however, was in his powers. The new Superman was not nearly as strong as his previous incarnations, a change that was made in an effort to keep stories from becoming too gimmicky. Although still invulnerable, Superman's reduced strength meant stories could involve much more dramatic tension, allowing the writers to finally draft compelling stories for the first time in years.

Byrne played to current cultural fears by stripping Lex Luthor of his pre-Crisis "mad scientist" personality and re-imagining him as an infinitely wealthy, scheming businessman whose xenophobia and lust for power drive him to see Superman as an alien interloper who meddles in his plans to better Metropolis (through whatever means necessary). Byrne, an immigrant himself, felt Superman's home world should be just as alien to him as it is to us, much like Siegel and Shuster. He even went so far as to render Krypton as a cold, dead, ice world in keeping with the 1979 film *Superman: The Movie*.

It was DC's belief that only a revamp as extreme as Byrne's could save Superman. The company had invested so much money, energy, and hope in Byrne's rewrite that production on *Action Comics* and *Superman*, the two oldest titles in the

industry, were halted for three months while Byrne's mini-series was running. In the end, the history created by Byrne was adhered to longer than almost any other attempt, lasting until Mark Waid's re-write in 2003.

Mark Waid's Superman: Birthright *(2003)*

Sensing the charm of Byrne's re-boot wearing thin, DC famously killed off Superman in 1995's *Death of Superman* story arc. Naturally, he was brought back to life later in the year. Nevertheless, this highly publicized stunt produced a halo effect that increased sales on all Superman titles for a short time; but once the media frenzy faded DC found itself in need of a new solution to the character's slipping social relevance. Superman, during the 1990s, was losing admirers to more violent, vulnerable heroes such as Wolverine and Batman, just as he had lost readers in the sixties to more socially conscious, anti-establishment heroes like Spider-man. To retaliate, DC once again commissioned a complete rewrite of Superman's history. This time around they hired author Mark Waid with orders to "re-imagine Superman for the twenty-first century" (Waid 5). Obviously, DC believed that a new generation of teenagers required a revamped Man of Steel, despite the fact one had just been completed seventeen years before.

Waid's version focused on Superman's alien heritage, making him a stranger in a strange land, longing for a place to belong. Clark's youth was briefly explored, and his powers were portrayed not as helpful tools, but as abilities that made him odd and limited his capability to closely bond with others. Waid's intent was to write a Superman that modern teenagers could relate to, and that meant emphasizing the character's loneliness

without making him appear maladjusted while still retaining his altruistic nature. One of the most curious and controversial changes involved Clark Kent becoming a strict vegetarian as a result of his new ability to "see" the aura of living things.

In preparation for the twelve-issue series that was scheduled for release in late 2003, Waid conducted extensive research, including interviews with current and potential readers. Among his findings was his discovery that youth saw life as exceedingly fragile. Numerous school shootings, increased gang activity, and heightened depictions of violence in music, movies and video games impressed upon those he interviewed a view that life as a teenager was fraught with ever increasing dangers. "The Gen-X and Gen-Next audience I cater to as a comics writer perceive the world around them as far more dangerous, far more unfair, and far more screwed up than my generation ever did," Waid writes (5). Despite an increasing fear of danger, these young men did not see Superman's invincible physique as an escape from their own mortality, because they were not looking for an escape. They, as comic book readers, chose to connect with heroes who purposefully endured bodily harm for the sake of their cause. Teenagers had become familiar with, and felt respect for, leaders such as Martin Luthor King Jr. or the firemen who rescued people from the twin towers – men who acted bravely despite the chance of death.

Yet despite his research, neither Waid nor DC understood how to capitalize on these findings, assuming instead that a project delving into Superman's motivations would be apropos. In fact, when he was commissioned to pen *Superman: Birthright*, Dan Didio, the Executive Editor at DC Comics, charged Waid with the task of answering a single question, "Why does he do what he does" (Waid 4)? *Superman: Birthright*

attempted to portray Superman as an outcast who endures loneliness for the sake his

mission, but even though much effort was invested in the construction of the *Birthright*

story, DC, unhappy with the lack of response it received, would render it meaningless

just a few years later.

Infinite Crisis (2005)

By 2006 DC had been struggling for years to find a "version" of Superman young

people could attach themselves to. In John Byrne's adaptation they intentionally, and

radically, broke from the past, but with the disappointment of *Birthright* the past looked

to be the only place left to go. Premiering in October 2005, the seven-issue mini-series

Infinite Crisis attempted to completely erase the effects *Crisis on Infinite Earths* had had

on the DC universe. Originally, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was intended to refashion DC's

Silver Age characters for the Modern Age of comics, a period marked by darker stories,

complex characters, and greater emphasis on an individual's flaws. *Infinite Crisis* was

DC's narrative excuse to reinstate within Superman the powers and personality traits he

had possessed prior to being "modernized" by John Byrne.

The story of *Infinite Crisis* introduces the reader to the only four characters to

survive the destruction of their home world during *Crisis on Infinite Earths* twenty years

earlier. Trapped in an alternate dimension, these four can observe but not directly affect

the events transpiring on Earth-1, the only Earth to survive the original *Crisis* storyline.

Eventually, these four break free of their prison, and one of them, believing that the

"wrong" Earth survived the destruction of 1985's *Crisis* storyline, manages to re-instate

the original "multi-verse" DC had operated under years before. The multi-verse, though,

renders reality unstable, and the heroes fight to reduce existence to a single universe. The conclusion of *Infinite Crisis* shows every Earth in the new multi-verse merging into a single world called "New Earth."

On this New Earth neither John Byrne's nor Mark Waid's reboots ever happened. DC now explains these alternate histories as "ripples in time" caused by the villain in *Infinite Crisis*. Eliminating every failed reboot allowed DC to work from a clean slate and try again. The Superman that currently exists on New Earth is a direct extension of Mort Weisinger's Superman from the 1950s, complete with unstoppable god-like powers and enhanced intelligence. DC has hinted at plans to restore Silver Age plot devices as well, meaning readers can expect a more campy approach to the book, an approach that comic book writer Grant Morrison has referred to as a "return to form."

Superman achieved his greatest sales figures during the Golden Age, when Siegel and Shuster helmed his books. After their departure in 1948, Superman's sales under the direction of editor Mort Weisinger remained strong even if they did not quite meet the volume that Siegel and Shuster generated. Weisinger reigned during the 1950s and 1960s (the Silver Age), a time characterized by steady sales if poor stories. *Infinite Crisis* is little more than a time warp for DC, allowing them to mimic an older style in hopes of recreating their past success. In this way, the "real" Superman would belatedly enter into the twenty-first century with John Byrne's modernization just a blip on the radar.

All Star Superman (2005)

Meant as a companion reality to current Superman titles, *All Star Superman* is less a reboot *per se* and more DC's attempt to mimic the success of Ultimate Marvel. Set

outside mainstream DC continuity, *All Star Superman* is writer Grant Morrison's nod to the comic books of his childhood. Released in November 2005 to capitalize on the media hype surrounding the new Superman movie, this version of Superman is intended to return him to his 1950s persona, much like the mainstream books have, hoping readers will be enticed by what DC believes to be the unadulterated form of the Superman mythos. The series pulls plot devices and story ideas primarily from the Mort Weisinger era (1950s and 1960s), reintroducing familiar items like The Fortress of Solitude, the bottled city of Kandor, and multi-colored Kryptonite. Superman retains the nearly limitless power he was known for in the Silver Age, and the stories written for him are nearly as campy. Issue number two, for example, features a story arc in which Superman meets Samson and Atlas and must best both at several super challenges in order to win Lois' hand. *All Star Superman* is little more than a repeat of Weisinger style stories, and is scheduled for at least twelve issues (issue number six was published January 2007 and is the most recent) depending on sales figures and reader interest.

What has so changed about our society to force DC to labor so intensely to craft the perfect teen-friendly hero? DC's problem with Superman stems from the fact that, despite all the reboots, his invulnerability has never been altered. Superman's personality has changed, his foster parents may or may not die from one narrative to the next, but his body remains as it was since his inception: a direct reflection of the traditional body norms prevalent in early twentieth century America. Superman was originally designed to withstand the machine age. To that end, his body is a flawless, powerful machine in and of itself. In his early comics Superman was often seen shrugging off cannon fire, walking

through bullets, or deliberately absorbing a blow to the head before capturing his prey. He related to the dangers around him in an almost giddy manner. The early twentieth century called for a hero to proclaim that help had arrived, that it was not simply man versus machine, and Superman was such an individual. Yet, the reason for success in 1938 is also the reason he struggles today, for his perfect body brings with it a series of complications when viewed through a postmodern lens.

As I will discuss in the following chapters, Superman's pristine body directly reflected modern cultural beliefs regarding the body's relation to selfhood; it also reflected the country's fascination with the New at the expense of history. The current generation of young comic book readers does not see their bodies the same way that youth did in 1938. Consequently, Superman's message has grown faint, while those heroes who were created for the postmodern generation have seen their stars rise.

Chapter 2: A Boy's Life In Early Twentieth Century America

Science and progress in the early twentieth century were seen as both the key to a blissful future and as a potential threat to human life if left unchecked or abused. Superman's appeal to boys rested in his physical superiority to the machines and science upon which people were becoming dependent: no one could engineer a device or a chemical powerful enough to best him. Called the "Man of Steel" by his creators, Superman was a unique blend of man and machine, a being capable of protecting us from
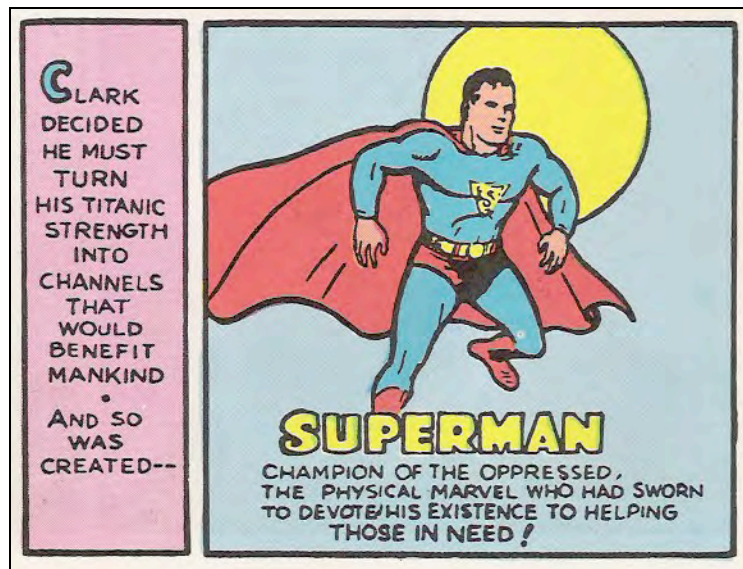
Figure 2.1 Superman's physique made him specially suited for 1938. (Courtesy DC Comics)

our own creations, big or small. In a time when American boys were finding their strength and stamina to be inferior to humankind's creations, Superman provided a fantasy framework into which American youth could channel their fears. The importance of this theme is evident in how Superman's abilities were gauged. The first panel of his comics had this to say about him: "Racing faster than a speeding bullet, leaping over skyscrapers, lifting and rending huge weights…these are the assets which aid Superman."

His strength is not measured in tons, nor his speed in miles per hour, but by their superiority to manufactured devices and machines. Figure 2.1, from a 1939 comic book, establishes that Superman can "devote his existence to helping those in need" because he is a "physical marvel." In Superman's world, it was not simply mad scientists with exotic weaponry that posed a danger to humanity. Superman had to remain ever vigilant, for any technology, no matter how beneficial, could go wrong and when it did only he was powerful enough to stop it.

Technology was seen as both a blessing and a curse – hence the need for Superman to operate as a mediator between man and machine. In his book *Gas, Gasoline, and Oil Engines*, British scientist A. Frederick Collins warns his young readers that, "in these days of labor-saving devices it is nothing short of a crime to pit your bodily strength against mechanical power" (vii). Words like these have an eerie effect. At once they seem wonderful, for they promise inventions so amazing that human toil could be reduced to virtually nothing. Yet, behind that promise rests the possibility that these inventions might be misused. We are potentially no match for our own creations, but Superman is, and that is why American boys bought his comics in such mass quantities: they knew first hand the dangers of which Collins spoke.

The life of an American boy after the turn of the century was anything but safe and sterile. Economic conditions required many children to work in order to supplement their parents' income, and employers, lacking any governmental accountability, did little to ensure the work environment was safe. The national census of 1900 found more than 1.75 million children ranging in age from 10 to 16 working for wages[1]. Both of

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[1] Levine, Marvin J. *Children For Hire*, p. 19

Superman's creators experienced borderline destitution first hand. Joe Shuster's parents often could not afford to heat their home in the winter, and Jerry Siegel was forced to hold a delivery job after school in order to help his family make ends meet[2].

By the time Superman was published child labor had been curbed slightly, only to explode again when America entered World War II. As the American economy shifted towards wartime production, labor grew so scarce that legislators in "over 25 states moved to pass measures that would relax restrictions on the employment of minors for the duration of the conflict" (Sickles 29). By 1944, thirty-five percent of all high-school aged boys had left school altogether to work full time. Most of the danger to children came in the amount of hours they were forced to work, which could total up to twelve per day, often after a full day of school. Injuries due to unsafe working conditions and negligence were common[3].

Superman acted as a necessary buffer to these experiences. The workplace was traumatic and dangerous, a place where ordinary, beneficial technology could instantly crush, maim, or kill, and for that reason many of Superman's escapades feature him confronting situations much like those boys faced at work. In "The Blakely Mine Disaster" from *Action Comics* #3 in 1940, Superman rescues a miner trapped in a cave-in. When Clark Kent approaches the mine owner about the man's injuries and working conditions, the owner scoffs, refusing to pay the man's medical bill and then denying that there is any safety hazard in his mine at all. After a heated interview, he sends Kent away, bellowing, "There is no safety hazard in my mine! But if there were…what of it? I'm a

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[2] Daniels, p. 11
[10] Hall, p. 7

businessman, not a humanitarian!" Unsatisfied with this answer, Superman returns to the office Clark Kent has vacated and throws the owner in his own mine, giving him a taste of what his unethical business practices feel like. Undoubtedly, Superman's career as a social reformist, especially where working conditions and labor are concerned, stem directly from the national fight to keep children out of work and in school, a fight to which Siegel and Shuster were witnesses.

It was not only in the factory, though, that technology proved potentially dangerous. The near total penetration of machinery into daily life meant that harm could lurk around any corner. Americans were naturally fascinated with invention and "newness" to such an extent that they quickly adopted and then became reliant on the tools they created. Their growing dependency on technology created a love-hate relationship with machines to the point that they found themselves fearful of the very tools they used to navigate daily life. Mark Selzter dubs this contradiction the "American body-machine complex"— the point at which Americans understood that their bodies were incapable of performing the same crucial tasks as machines, and were unable of providing defense should the machines be used against them (3). In essence, Americans were at once hopeful about, and distrustful of, the mechanical marvels they invented, and an awareness of the danger machinery presented to the average city dweller bloomed in the American consciousness in the early twentieth century. Nestled in the back of people's minds was the idea that if a rogue machine at work did not get you, one from another aspect of your daily life might.

The theme of everyday, seemingly beneficial technology posing a danger to humanity existed in Metropolis for this very reason. In a 1941 series of Sunday morning

strips entitled "Destroy All Trucks," for example, Superman rescues several people not from bombs or war machines, but from runaway freight trucks. In one of the sequences, a crowd watches helplessly as a truck, its driver dead at the wheel, careens out of control toward a female pedestrian in the middle of the road. Lifting the truck over his head, Superman effortlessly "rips open the drive shaft so that the huge wheels cease whirling." Declaring, "That did it," Superman puts the truck back down and flies off, leaving the crowd stunned. Superman's comics treated the urban environment not unlike a mechanical, artificially constructed jungle, with man as the potential prey. At times, this jungle slumbered, its contraptions subdued, but it could suddenly awaken, as stories like "Destroy All Trucks" illustrated, and when it did terrible things would ensue if Superman were not present.

Gradually, Superman's comics developed a series of symbols to deal visually with the cultural sentiments they were addressing. Superman himself often operated as the symbol for technology under control, and to express the idea of technology gone wrong Siegel and Shuster appropriated the image of the scientist – the man who could seemingly manipulate the fundamental forces of nature – and twisted him (Figure 2.2). The mad scientist known as The Ultra-Humanite, complete with white lab coat, became Superman's first arch nemesis, and is considered to be the first super villain in comics. First appearing in *Action Comics* #13, the Ultra-Humanite, physically crippled but mentally brilliant, was written as the exact opposite of Superman. Lex Luthor, Superman's most popular antagonist, now exists as a corrupt, powerful CEO, but he too first appeared as an evil scientist. When Superman confronts Luthor for the first time he bellows, "What sort of creature are you?" to which Luthor calmly responds, "Just an
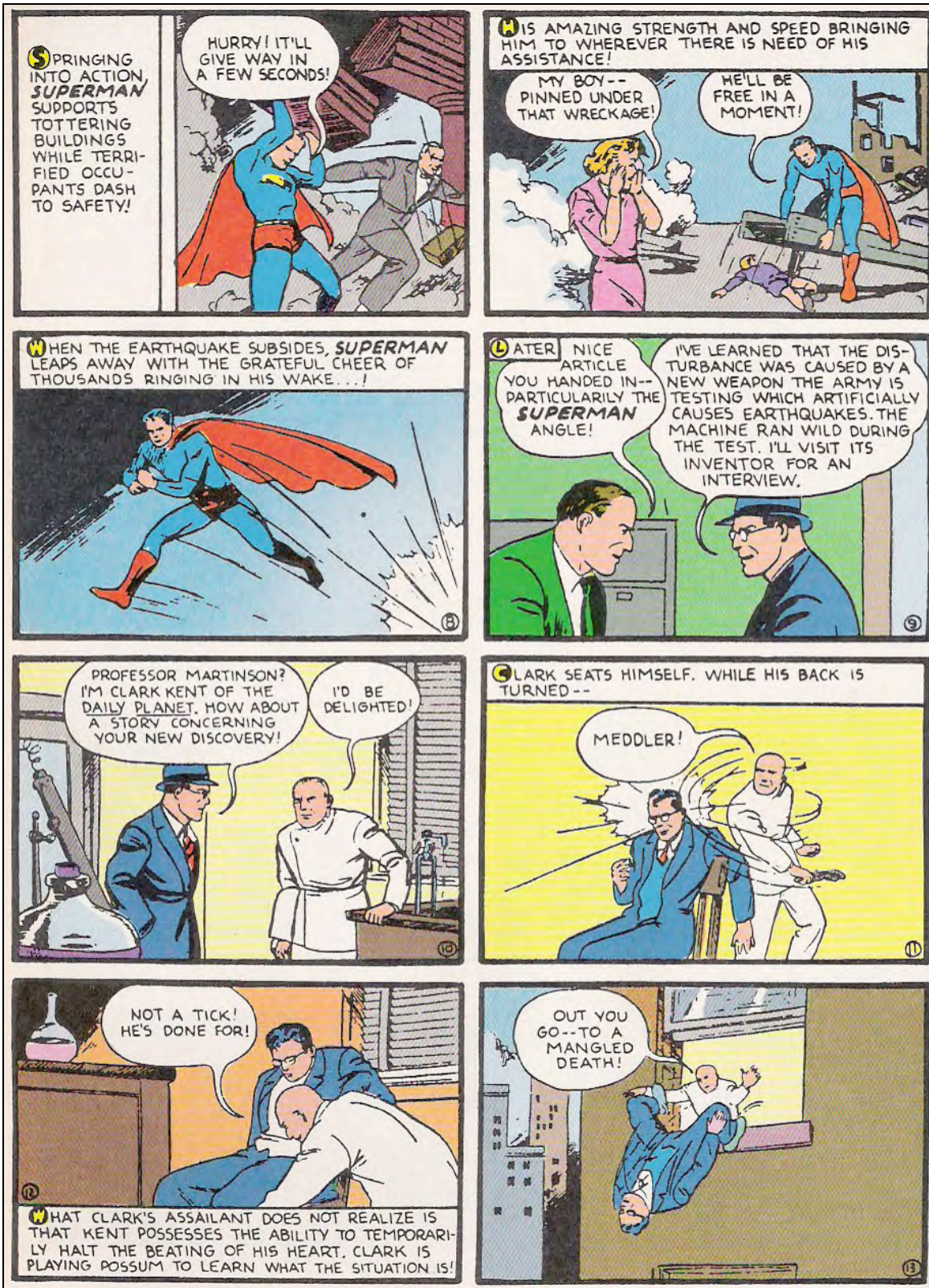
Figure 2.2 The mad scientist, representative of technology gone awry, became a prominent villain in the 1940s. (Courtesy DC Comics)

ordinary man – but with the brain of a super-genius! With scientific miracles at my fingertips, I'm preparing to make myself supreme master of the world!"[4] Another encounter between the two shows them colliding with each other as Luthor exits a bank, loot in hand. Luthor, unfazed by Superman's presence, begins to deride the hero's confidence, chalking it up, not to true bravery, but to his physique. "Always the victor – always invulnerable to opposition," says Luthor, "if what's going to happen wasn't so comical, I'd think it tragic!" Extending his hand, Luthor zaps Superman with a yellow ray, freezing him in place. Gloating, Luthor exclaims, "You see…I now have the power of electricity on my side! The mighty Superman, faced by a power as strong as himself!" Of course, Superman breaks free in the next panel by "exerting every ounce of his amazing strength," but the drama of this scene stems from the fact that, for a split second, Superman is confronted by the two symbols of progress – electricity and the scientist – and proves barely equal to the challenge[5].

Despite all the fears and dangers surrounding progress, though, science and the new technology that accompanied it were seen as a largely positive force. By the time Superman was published in 1938, cultural excitement over technological advances had reached a fever pitch. This positive view of innovation, in contrast to the fear of technological abuse, explains why Superman is also associated with science. Dubbed the "Man of Tomorrow," he literally harnessed within himself all of the perfected forms of the technological powers that promised to transform America into a utopia.

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[4] "Untitled" *Action Comics* #23, 1940
[12] *Action Comics* #47, 1942

The early decades of the 1900s saw publishers attempting to appeal to a new breed of American boy (Figure 2.3). The magazine *Popular Mechanics* capitalized on the fascination with science and technology when they published *The Boy Mechanic: 700 Things for Boys to Do* in 1913. An extremely popular publication, this seminal work legitimized the "do you it yourself" mentality. Some of the ideas it contained were harmless, others – such as hang gliders, internal combustion engines, and pipes bombs – were not, but the book was a hit because it perfectly captured the spirit of the times. Suddenly, the backyard became one's workshop and American boys could not get enough.

Contributing to this trend was a book called *The Boy Chemist* written by A. Frederick Collins and published in 1925. Capitalizing on the astounding success of *The Boy Mechanic,* and the recent trend in experimenting with substances such as X-Rays, *The Boy Chemist* held nothing back. In leisurely, approachable prose, Collins taught boys how to make sulfuric acid, experiment with radium, and construct their own X-Ray machines through 340 illustrations. If a boy managed to successfully make an X-Ray machine, Collins then advised him to turn his machine on himself to see his own bone structure. For its time, *The Boy Chemist* was everything an American boy in 1925 could have hoped for. These two books illustrate the fascination with the twin facets of progress, science and technology, which would later be combined in the character of Superman.

Collins' suggestion that American boys subject their young bodies to harmful X-Rays was perfectly in line with the X-Ray fever that had swept North America shortly after their discovery. Like most scientific discoveries of the time, X-Rays were seen as an

amazing force of nature that could make life easier, and these miracle rays were used in

ways we would consider unthinkable, including as a form of painless hair removal.

THE MANUFACTURE OF RADIUM
Five hundred tons of ore, and five thousand different operations are required to make one gram (thimbleful) of radium.

Figure 3.3 The frontispiece to *Wonders of Chemistry* (1922) by A.F. Collins shows unprotected men handling radioactive radium.

Indeed, turn of the century Americans had a love for progress that nearly outshone their

survival instinct. Historian Rebecca Herzig argues that part of the reason X-Ray epilation

lasted for nearly fifty years was merely "it's association with 'science'" (726). An

uncontrollable desire to use science to extend man's control over nature drove America's

excitement behind all things "scientific" in the early twentieth century. The inclusion of

X-Ray vision as one of Superman's powers is a direct outgrowth of this infatuation. In

fact, his X-Ray vision originally served the role of what is today divided into his X-Ray

and heat vision powers, illustrating the idea of X-Rays as a multi-purpose tool, capable of meeting any need that might arise.

By the mid-1930s, much of the excitement surrounding scientific advancement had been tempered. The early twentieth century, through the eyes of the American public, had been marked by technological progress (the Model-T, the Wright brothers, X-Rays, etc), destruction wrought by technological progress (World War I, X-Ray illness), and a crippling economic depression. Though hopeful about the benefits technology could provide, Americans were cautious, but the message of science as savior was resurrected for the purpose of social pacification by Roosevelt's Depression-era agencies. These agencies desperately attempted to convince the country that the road to prosperity lay in America's technological genius, often making extravagant claims in the name of science.

The Tennessee Valley Authority was one program in which the grandiose projections were actually fulfilled. George W. Norris, the senator that helped organize the project, publicly stated that the TVA program featured such advanced technology that it would "bring blessings of peace and comfort to all of our people" (Ezzell 8). As idealistic as that sounds, Norris went on to conclude that so great would the modernization of the Valley be, that generations of Americans would thank President Roosevelt and "render praise to his memory for signing the bill" (Ezzell 8). These statements were intended as propaganda, playing on the public's perception of "science as savior," but by 1939 the TVA project had fulfilled a good many of its claims. Deemed a success, it gave credence to the idea that technology could lift an entire section of the country out of abject poverty, and further fueled the nation's expectations regarding the possibilities of science.

Superman, who first appeared in 1939, symbolized America's renewed love affair with science and technology, re-energized by projects like the TVA and soon to reach a zenith with the New York World's Fair of 1939. Superman and the World's Fair of 1939 have a lot in common. There is no single event that better defines the attitude of the first half of the twentieth century in America, and there is no single cultural hero who better defines American pride and enthusiasm in the same time period. The theme of the fair, "Building The World of Tomorrow," was an echo of Superman's title "The Man of Tomorrow." So interconnected were these two icons that on July 3, 1940 the World's Fair even hosted a Superman day. Dropping the price of admission to one dime, an actor, the first ever to don a Superman costume, walked around the park meeting the fair goers. DC also used Superman to promote the World's Fair, allowing him to be featured on the cover of a promotional comic book called World's Fair Comics along with Batman and Robin.

The World's Fair was a showcase of the newest inventions focusing on the benefits of technology and progress. In fact, the fair intended to make those two words virtually synonymous. The temple for a modern day religion of science, the fair symbolized "a solution for an improved future" (Bletter 54). "Futurama," a massive 36,000 square foot model of the United States circa 1960, was the most popular attraction, and featured narration that prophesied that by 1960 "man has forged ahead. New and better things have sprung from his genius." According to the exhibit, "all the activities of science lead us onward to better methods of doing things."

Utilized in the World's Fair was a new architectural style called Streamline Moderne that had begun to gain popularity in the early 1930s as a means of visually

expressing motion (Figure 2.4). This contrasted with Art Deco, the former dominant architectural style, which was steeped in classical tradition and focused on complex ornamentation. Streamline was, quite literally, an effective "clean break with the past" (Young 59). To put it simply, the streamline aesthetic consisted of "smooth surfaces devoid of any adornments" (Young 59). A minimalist form, comprised mostly of speed lines, it "romanticized technology" and signified America's view of machines as sleek, smooth running systems that could achieve much with minimal friction and effort (Hanks 18). Through streamlining, even the most mundane objects became extravagant, futuristic items, appearing "new and improved" even if the technology behind them had not changed at all[6]. It was this need for speed that the New York World's Fair harnessed when it showed the future manifested in buildings shaped as if they were moving into the future themselves.

Superman was distinctly designed with these concepts in mind. He is the streamlined man, able to actually move at the speeds machines do. He is able to use his muscles as efficiently as machines use pistons and turbines, and, in the end, he is able to best them. One of the greatest stories of this kind, "Superman versus Lex Luthor" (*Superman* #4, 1940), shows Superman challenged to a duel by Luthor, who pits him against humanity's mightiest scientific achievements (Figure 2.5). Each invention Luthor produces, from a super-sonic intercontinental plane to an electromagnetic levitation device, is met one-for-one by one of Superman's powers. In another story, Superman is called on to rescue a racecar driver whose has been given a sedative prior to the race.

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[6]*The New York World's Fair 1939/1940 in 155 Photographs* by Richard Wurts provides an amazing, first-hand look at the construction and architecture of the Fair.

Figure 2.4 Streamline Moderne as applied to a bus stop in Ann Arbor, MI, built 1940. (Photo by John Baird)

As the driver speeds around the track, he loses consciousness and his car swerves out of control. Knowing he must catch up to the car in order to prevent the driver's death, Superman runs onto the track, saying, "This calls for speed," catching the car in the knick of time[7]. In both of these stories, Superman proves himself to be the equal of the best technology man has constructed, and the lesson here is clear: whatever technology people build, Superman embodies, thereby making him the only one capable of saving us from ourselves.

Superman collected together within himself the most promising aspects of technology and sterilized them, thereby rendering inert their more dangerous properties. His body, invulnerable to all harm, also made such things as X-Rays docile, turning them into a useful tool with no negative consequences. Able to withstand the rigors of the machine age, he eased the anxieties Americans had over technology they could not outperform. Always in control of his immense powers, Superman represented nothing so much as the machine, under the control of man, used to achieve great deeds. As such, Superman at his core symbolized the positive effects of technology while triumphing over the negative. Superman acted as a bridge between man and machine, a benefactor we could trust to intercede for us should our own technology go awry, and this is how boys at the time saw him.

Technology scholar John Lienhard believes it is the pioneering spirit present in Americans that drives us to create and to understand. The same spirit, he writes, that "claimed Manifest Destiny to own the continent," yearned to subdue and control nature in the same manner, with enthusiasm and brute strength (2). By 1900, America had

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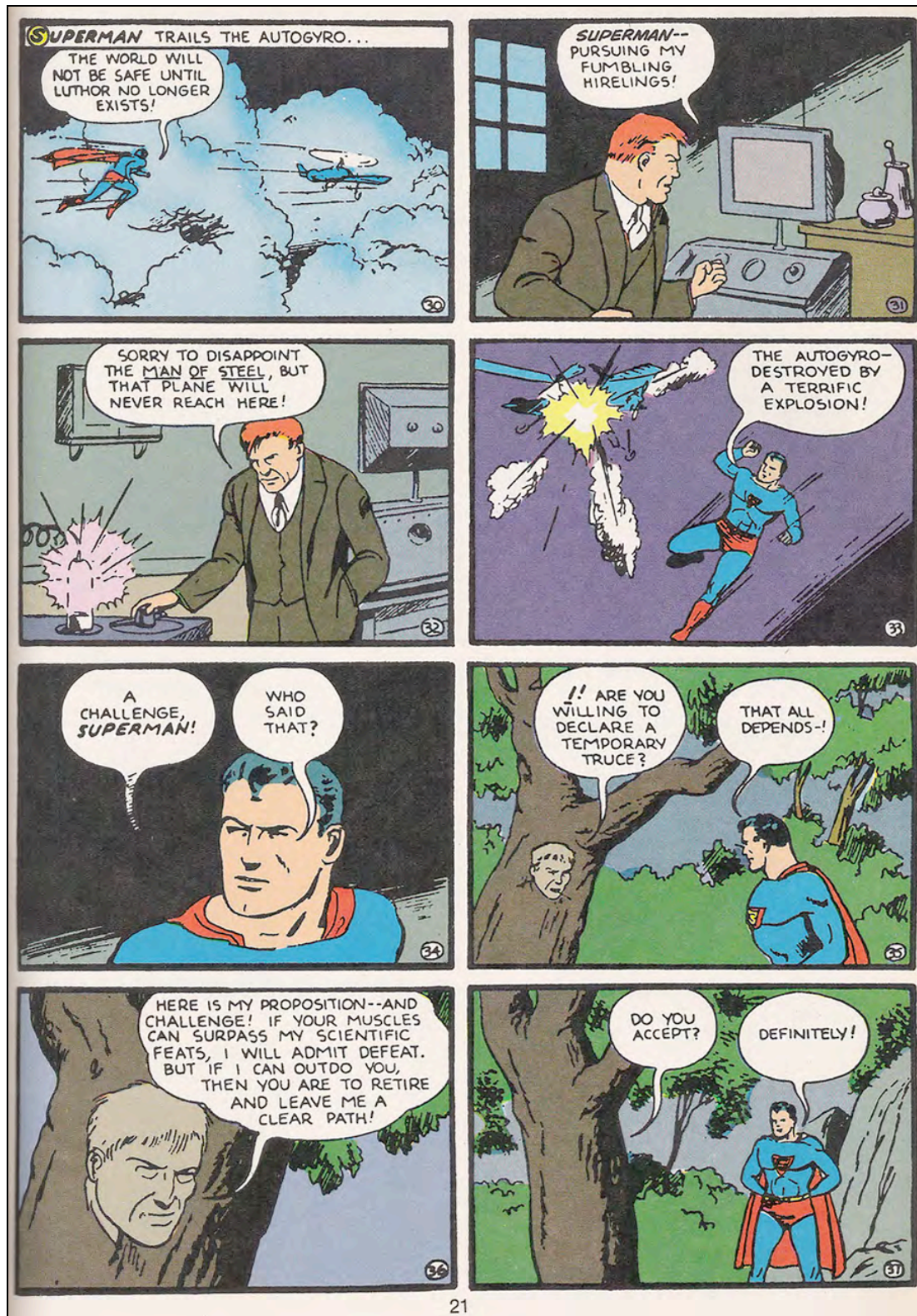[7] "Death Race," Sunday strips 71-85, 1941

Figure 2.5 Superman accepts Luthor's technological challenges. (Courtesy DC Comics)

succeeded in that dream, and the twentieth century brought with it a tidal wave of change; people had taught themselves how to harness the awesome powers of electricity, process chemistry, and internal combustion, and these scientific successes would enable us to do things we never dreamed possible, altering our lives in the process.

It was into this climate of transformation that Joel Siegel and Joe Shuster were born in 1914 to Jewish immigrants, a mere six years after Ford began production on the Model T, and eleven years after the Wright brother's historic flight. These young men entered America at one of the most dramatic moments in its history. Siegel and Shuster were born, essentially, into a society on the verge of an identity crisis, for science and technology were changing the way people saw the universe and themselves. Humans emerged as the true master of this planet while appearing more fragile than ever before. The very energies and processes we became able to harness were far from safe. Scientific discoveries and technological innovations promised an unprecedented amount of control over the forces of nature, while simultaneously demonstrating just how dangerous the world was. Superman was their answer to these issues. Knowing the cultural forces at work in early twentieth century America, it is not hard to understand how Superman could have taken the country by storm so quickly. The atmosphere was right for a hero of his kind, someone who was not quite man, not quite machine, but a little of both and yet something more. His invulnerable body allowed him to harness deadly X-Rays with no adverse effects, challenge Luthor's deadly devices, take on evil businessmen with no fear of being injured, and stand up for those of us whose bodies were too weak to even begin to think of doing such things. We humans might be frail and limited, but Superman was not. His body seemed able to withstand anything man or nature could throw at him.

Writing about the nature of comics, Danny Fingeroth, former head of the Spider-man titles, notes that superheroes always "represent the values of the society that produce [them]" (17). Superman is no exception to this rule. He is an irresistible force whose body was specifically designed to withstand the rigors of life in the early twentieth century. He was built to be the mediator between us and the machines upon which we depend for our comfort and survival. In Superman we see reflected the societal concerns of young men living in the early twentieth century, concerns that bear little resemblance to the young men of today. Teenage boys in 1938 America viewed their bodies as imminently fragile compared to the tools man was constructing in order to build an ordered society, and Superman, with his perfect, impervious physique aided their transition through adolescence. He provided for them a shelter from the potentially harmful machines.

Chapter 3: Contemporary Body Norms & Superheroes

Superman's meteoric rise in popularity during the 1930s and 1940s is a direct reflection of how he met the cultural pressures, fears, and normative values in America. As explained in the previous chapter, key to his popularity was how Superman's physical body uniquely spoke to the sociological needs of the time period, but times have changed, and so have the value systems Superman was originally created to embrace. Central to my discussion of Superman's current irrelevance is understanding how the body has traditionally been viewed in America, and how that view has shifted over the decades. On the one hand, Superman's immunity to harm allayed the underlying fears inherent in America's mass adoption of machines to perform war tasks, manufacture goods, treat and diagnose illnesses, and assist in locomotion, but there was more at work than simply a fear of being overpowered by machinery. While bodily harm (and Superman's immunity to it) might have, indeed, been a cause for his success, Superman was speaking to a firmly entrenched value system of which body theory was a major part (Figure 3.1). Superman's body reinforced the modernist body theories and beliefs of his time, but as these theories have changed, Superman has become less a reassuring reflection of culture, and more a nostalgia piece. Although a successful modern hero, his persistent invulnerability has resulted in a decline in his relevance to postmodern youth.

How the body informs one's personhood is anything but static in a socio-historical sense. Every culture's view of the body, and how the body relates to a sense of self, speaks to "the broader social and cultural universe in which those bodies are

Figure 3.1 It was more important for Superman's body to be impervious than capable of self-expression. Notice panel #4. (Courtesy DC Comics)

located" (Benson 234). Exploring American "body politics," as Benson calls them, and how these politics have changed or been disregarded over the decades, leads to a better understanding of Superman's current lack of significance for teenage males. In particular, the current obsession with "primitive" rituals such as tattooing and piercing put a large part of Superman's potential fan base in direct opposition to the body values he stands for as illustrated by his indelible, impenetrable skin.

Starting in the early 1980s, body modification techniques that have customarily been associated with the "cultural detritus" were suddenly and fiercely embraced by American youth, and this appropriation has subsequently led to what many sociologists call a "body modification revival." The term 'body modification,' as normally used by sociologists, can indicate any conscious change of the body, either permanent or temporary, for the purpose of achieving a specific goal, be it cultural acceptance, or personal satisfaction. The two most popular types of body modifications that, while once at odds with cultural standards, have slowly gained acceptance with American youth are tattooing and piercing. There are, of course, many more extreme varieties of modification, but these have yet to be received beyond the niche groups in which they and are therefore unrelated to my target demographic[1]. Many of these techniques (calcium implants, hanging from hooks, penis splitting, etc.) have never strayed far from the counter-cultural or sexual undergrounds. The acts of marking or piercing one's body have been traditionally viewed as nothing more than rebellious challenges to established Western body norms, but current sociological research, influenced by post-essentialist

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[1] The book *Modern Primitives* by V. Vale and Andrea Juno is considered to be one of the best discussions of these acts.

theorists such as Michel Foucault, have detected a deeper, more personal reason attached to these practices. More than a mere defiance of authority, the tattoo culture revival has been a way for youth to "construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity through attention to the body and, more particularly, the body's surface" (Sweetman 53). Youth, in pursuit of personal meaning, are challenging traditional body norms not for the sake of rebellion, but because the traditional American value system Superman was built to champion has left them without a sense of ancestry or cultural history. Our age is an "age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place (Jameson ix)," and this dilemma has manifested itself in youth appropriating practices that give them power over their corporeal self.

The act of leaving the past behind was implicit in becoming "American" in the first half the twentieth century as explained in the previous chapter. Americans cherish the ability to *move* in all its forms, and this physical act was built into the socio-economic climate of the country. The very identities of American capitalism are "plasticity and motility", argues Benson, and these characteristics describe not only Western economies but also the notions of personhood fostered by these economies. In a climate where hard work is rewarded with vertical movement in the social hierarchy, people are expected to adapt to any new social class in which they find themselves. Effectively, this prevents people from becoming defined by any one geographical region, class, or job – distinct markers that have historically aided individuals in establishing a sense of self in relation to a larger set of socially delineated roles. Early twentieth century America's "democratic

capitalism" sought to break free of strict, imposed social classes, and this novel approach

is what gave America her luster. She was seen as the land of opportunity for good reason.

Siegel and Shuster, sons of Jewish immigrants, recognized and believed in this

economic system, and Superman was designed to be its ultimate supporter. It was into

this milieu that Siegel and Shuster injected Superman in 1938, a man who had been

moved from his home planet of Krypton, and soon became the United States' most loyal

and powerful immigrant, built specifically to conform to Western cultural norms while

remaining capable of physically handling the technological progressions that were

changing our society.

This act of leaving a home to find one's self in another location and culture is not

simply a narrative device used to give Superman's story some excitement; it is a vital

aspect of American identity and not just for immigrants. Movies such as *Easy Rider* and

Taxi Driver imply that not only do all Americans have an innate need to roam, but that

they can only find themselves by doing so. Early twentieth century America saw

Superman's ability to leave his old world behind as a representation of what it meant to

be American. In fact, Superman's journey from Krypton to earth might have taken only a

few panels to unfold, but the ramifications of being a stranger in a strange land make up

the essence of his story. Part of Superman's journey was to discover what it means to be

both fully American and fully Other. In this way, Siegel and Shuster tied Superman to the

American immigrant experience while also speaking to the growing youth culture of the

1940s. As boys and teenagers read Superman's comics, they found both a hero and a

friend. His alien heritage made him utterly sympathetic to the turmoil of self-realization

in 1938, and his flawless, impervious physique made him an idol who understood the

social norms and pressures boys were faced with. Eager readers saw Superman

acknowledge his alien heritage, yet never crumble under the weight of isolation, and they

idolized him because they wanted to face their own hurt and turmoil in the way he faced

gunfire. Superman was a hero perfectly acclimated to the 1940s, able to speak to the new,

unrecognized young adult market because he had successfully navigated his "loner"

status by choosing to ignore it completely and fully adopt the culture of his adopted

country. Never once did he muse on his solitude in those early days of the comic book.

Instead, he chose to excel physically, thereby making a place (and a name) for himself in

America. The lessons he preached were of hard work and conformity, and Superman

reflected the cultural value of *becoming* American by completely leaving one's past

behind.

Superman, though Kryptonian, was fully American, and there were no plot points

or story arcs introduced to question his dedication[2]. When he claims to be for "Truth,

Justice, and the American Way," Siegel and Shuster were not chuckling under their

breath. In fact, even after learning of his heritage, Superman's loyalty never wavered. He

had made his choice, and his choice was simple: Krypton was the past, America was his

future, and who his identity would be found in America, not in a society he had long

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[2] It was not until "deconstructionist" comic books became popular in 1980s that alternative approaches to super heroes gained any ground. Alan Moore's *The Watchman* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* are considered the seminal works in this genre. The most interesting one about Superman is J. Michael Straczynski' cynical re-telling of the myth in *Supreme Power*, published by Marvel. For an intellectual discussion of this topic see Aeon J. Skoble's essay "Superhero Revisionism in *Watchman* and *The Dark Knight Returns*" in the book *Superheroes and Philosophy*, as well as Geoff Klock's *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*.

since abandoned. Superman's American identity is tied not only to *accepting* America, but actively *leaving* Krypton. With his ancestry behind him, Superman could press on, sculpting a new self, a modern self, unencumbered by the baggage of the past.

The success that Superman championed does not come without a price. Often, the pursuit of upward mobility requires a geographical relocation and a willingness to leave friends, family, and history behind in order to succeed. Gary Engle, in his essay "What Makes Superman So Darned American," observes that "the American identity is ordered around the psychological experience of forsaking or losing the past for the opportunity of reinventing oneself in the future" (81). Mobility is the key word here, and Superman's ability to fly makes him more American than anyone else in this sense. He is the perfectly mobile immigrant who has nowhere to go but up. Siegel and Shuster's Superman reflected the idea that American culture consumed one's ethnic background.

While social mobility is not in and of itself a type of body norm, it does directly influence a series of body norms. The capitalistic culture of America, and specifically of the late 1930s, rewarded a worker's willingness to divorce him or herself from any culturally significant items or ways of thinking that might interfere with his or her American assimilation. This type of culture produces body norms that value above all else "fluidity, mutability, and the capacity for constant reconfiguration" (Benson 236). Marry the pressures of being permanently available for upward mobility with the religious forces that have historically been dominant in American society, and a picture of body norms in early twentieth century America begins to emerge. The result is a normative view of the body as a fixed part of the self that must be kept in submission

while still allowing room for adornment that promotes a message of financial stability.

Many of these ideas are directly inherited from the Enlightenment period, a period that

viewed the body as a hindrance to the purification of the soul. The Enlightenment,

defined through Christian values, emphasized a "mind/body binary in which the mind

was seen as more significant, while the body was dismissed as a hindrance" (Pitts 26).

Epistemologically, then, the body was viewed as of little consequence. Enlightenment

and Christians ideas concerning the soul and body dichotomy stressed a personhood

conceived around what lies inside, not on top of the body, and where "a relationship

between surface and depth has been figured as the relationship between appearance and

essence" (Benson 235). While the body's role in establishing a sense of self has

undergone extensive changes recently with the rise of post-essentialist theorists, when

Superman was created the overwhelmingly dominant view remained that of the

traditional, middle class, Christian value system.

The Christian value system, of which Superman was a part, believed the body's

role in American society was to generate the greatest degree of personal accomplishment,

not personal understanding. The ideal American of the early twentieth century was one

who, while willingly mobile and dismissive of his or her roots, remained intent on

conforming to Western values, including manners of speech, religious preferences,

clothing choices, and bodily appearance. People were encouraged to fit in and "dress for

success," a sentiment echoed throughout modernist society as outward expression

became an important method for dealing with cultural changes. Superman was a bright,

bold, visual cue to quell fears concerning the machine age. Likewise, Streamline

architecture, and the pomp of the New York World's Fair acted as visual markers that allowed people in early twentieth century America to get their bearings.

The modernist world was concerned with watching the new America come into being, and the body was treated in much the same fashion. Deprived of an important role in the construction of a sense of self, the body was sculpted as a marketing tool, an instrument one could manipulate to project the image society required. Usually, this was achieved through clothing choices or natural, non-radical, temporary body modification techniques such as exercise and dieting. The byproduct of such a lifestyle was the encouragement of personal expression insofar as it did not interfere directly with American body aesthetics, and the worst violation of this aesthetic was any permanent, non-natural marking on the body. In a nation where the old was constantly making way for the new, and indeed, people were encouraged to remain unshackled to their past, erecting a permanent reminder of one's history in the form of a tattoo or other means violated the unspoken creed American society had set up. Middle class America during the early part of the twentieth century saw the body as "inviolate" and "too pure to be disfigured" (DeMillo 140). Beyond that, religion and American work ethics dictated that self-discipline take precedence over self-expression. Control of the body was a crucial yet paradoxical chore impressed upon American society. The consistently decaying nature of the body, the frail shell encasing our souls, forces us to order our schedules around its needs. As the body forces the "true" aspect of our identities, the soul, to submit to the daily tasks of eating and sleeping in order to keep it functional, so should man consciously make the body subservient to his will, proving the eternal, rational spirit

more powerful than the fallen flesh. Denying the body voice in one's search for self-hood

acts as a method of control. The body was seen as the "manifestation of the will of the

subject" in early twentieth century America, a time preoccupied with "possession, fixitiy,

and the stabilization of the self through and in corporeality" (Benson 237). The America

that Superman ruled over praised man's ability to be mobile and disconnected while

physically remaining unspoiled and unchanged, and Superman's body allowed him to

become a manifestation of all these traits. His perfect, impenetrable body conforms to the

"classical ideal of the skin as a pristine, smooth, closed envelope for the self" (Pitts 26).

Outwardly, he adhered to the American desire to be "pure," and free from historical

baggage. His inability to be scarred gives him no distinguishable external markings. In

other words, Superman's body, devoid of recognizable, unique attributes, is externally

personality-less. He is the "ultimate" human in the sense that his body is a perfect cipher,

a substitute for all of us who espouse a similar dedication to hard work and personal

advancement.

In direct contrast to the body values of early twentieth century America,

postmodern youth are exploring and modifying their body to form a sense of selfhood.

Post-essentialist theories of the body "reject the notion that there is an 'essential,' proper,

ideal body," and postmodern sensibilities highlight the need to internalize one's cultural

navigation (Pitts 28). Since the 1960s, the belief in universal principles and guidelines

has steadily broken down, and this "escalating disbelief in dominant cultural meta-

narratives" that are used to establish value-sets for understanding the nature of bodies has

allowed youth to treat their bodies as malleable, dramaturgical instruments (Atkinson 11).

A growing dissatisfaction with the traditional view of the body has given rise to no one view in particular. Sociologist Victoria Pitts explains that the influence of such theorists as Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault has pushed researchers to conclude that the body, along with a person's sense of self, is historically and culturally dependent. In place of a fixed ontology, she argues, there are now competing truths. People are free to see their body how they will, and youth are rebelling against the capitalist view of permanent "newness" that Superman's body champions in favor of using their bodies for expression. As a result, the phenomenal growth in the popularity of tattooing among youth is acknowledged as one of the factors behind the current understanding of postmodern American body values[3].

While Superman kept his body unmarred and clean in order to separate himself from any personal history and to assimilate into his new culture, youth today use tattoos to supply themselves with a history so they can more effectively construct of sense of self-hood. A tattoo is more than ink on skin, and "its meanings and reverberations cannot be comprehended without a knowledge of the history and mythology of its bearer" (Vale, Juno 26). Where tattoos and piercings were once considered by society to be the epitome of irresponsibility and lack of foresight, upon closer inspection they reveal themselves to be, in many instances, the exact opposite. The sheer permanency of tattoos suggests forethought and planning. Tattoos are, by their very nature, premeditated, intentional symbols that hold complex meaning. There is no tattoo in existence without a story behind it, whether it is the result of a drunken night with friends, or a design long labored

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[3] All of the sociologists I cite agree that the practice is indeed growing among youth, and they site their own studies, numerous interviews, and historical research as confirmation.

over. The potency of the tattoo as ritual rests in the story behind each piece. Each tattoo is a signpost, a historical marker on the large map of life, and these signposts have power to help "anchor or stabilize one's sense of self-identity" through the "establishment of a coherent personalized narrative" (Sweetman 53). Humans have an innate need to tell stories, for stories not only remind us of where we've been, but they help us position ourselves inside a larger framework of reality. A "narrative discourse organizes life," including "social relations, interpretations of the past, and plans for the future" (Daiute xi). Body modification is being used by postmodern youth to achieve this very effect.

Naturally, early twentieth century America was not completely devoid of bodily symbols. Clothing and jewelry are accoutrements that can be imbued with just as much meaning as a tattoo, and can contribute to a sense of identity. Superman does not, for instance, wear the same set of clothes for each of his personas. When he is Clark Kent, he dons the famous glasses to signal his transformation to himself as much as to the world. The primary difference, though, between clothing and body modification is in the permanency and ritualistic practices associated with tattoo application. Besides creating a personal narrative, youth use tattoos and piercing as a form of control over the body that they now see as uncontrollable. For early twentieth century Americans, the human body could be made subservient to the mind depending on the commitment, sacrifice, and work one was willing to invest. Superman is a narrative manifestation of this belief. His body, though so overpowered as to possess god-like strength, is always perfectly regulated by his mind. Superman, in fact, could not even function in society were it not for an inhuman ability to keep his phenomenal might in check. One wrong twitch of his

arms could result in crushing Lois during an embrace, or breaking a hand as he shakes it, or pushing a door through a wall as he enters a room, and his heat vision must be restrained or people would go up in smoke when he arrived to save them. If Superman were not in full control over his bodily functions the world would be in jeopardy, yet his body is never presented as a difficult pupil. His muscles do not flex and seethe like wild horses on tethers. His eyes do not glow with a fire itching to be let loose. Not only is his skin pristine and incapable of being tarnished, but the very muscles, tendons, and organs that could turn the world to dust are kept forever docile by his impeccable mind.

For postmodern youth, however, the body is seen as anything but controllable. Enlightenment values taught that the mind could, through discipline, bring all things under humankind's control. This idea manifested itself in Modern culture as scientific innovations focused on controlling natural forces, and in the body's subservience to the will. With the loss of these value systems the body has become a key component in one's formation of a selfhood. Bestowing the body with epistemological power while removing the mind's dominance over it has resulted in a view of the body as unpredictable. Tattooing and piercing is a way to tame the beast through the symbolic practice of marking it and experiencing pain. As Andrew, a body modification enthusiast, told author Virginia Pitts, "In body modification, you can take control of what you otherwise could not" (1). The act of forcing one's self to sit through a painful process like tattooing is linked to ideas of property and possession over the body.

The vision of uncontrollable bodies is shared in today's popular superhero comics, most notably in Marvel's X-Men titles, arguably the most successful comic in the

last twenty years. In the Marvel universe super-powers are usually bestowed in one of

two ways, either through scientific accidents (The Incredible Hulk, Spider-man), or

through being born a mutant[4]. Mutants are humans that have the "X" gene, a rare,

recessive gene that alters the body in such a way as to supply that person with super-

powers. Not coincidentally, mutant powers begin manifesting during puberty, and they

pose just as much a danger to the user as they do to the outside world. The mutant body,

writes Scott Bukatman, is "explicitly traumatic, armored against the world outside yet

racked and torn apart by complex forces within" (51). Unlike Superman, the mutant body

is a paradox: "rigidly protected but dangerously unstable" (Bukatman 51). The mutants in

Marvel's world are not made so by choice, and are viewed, by humans, as genetic

mistakes that cannot be trusted. Thus, the X-Men purposefully "protect those who fear

them," as their slogan goes.

Hardly a better metaphor for postmodern body theory can be found. Bodies in

Marvel's comics are distrusted and dangerous, possessing inherent power that is often out

of control. Yet the body is also directly related to each character's sense of self and one's

position among his or her fellow teammates. Nightcrawler, for example, is devoutly

religious and known for his compassion, yet his appearance, that of a blue-colored,

pointy-eared demon, causes others to assume he is evil. Mutants, who must hide their true

nature to be accepted, have a significantly more difficult time navigating social

structures, and for those like Nightcrawler (Figure 3.2) who cannot hide their powers,

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[4] Bruce Banner was transformed into the Incredible Hulk after being exposed to gamma radiation during an experiment, and Peter Parker became Spider-man after a radioactive spider bit him.

true, universal acceptance is forever a fairy tale. Mutant bodies are nothing more than discussions about the concern with social boundaries and hierarchical order set to a tune teenagers can understand. Their immense popularity should come as no surprise, for they speak the language of contemporary American body norms. When Professor Xavier, head of the X-Men, adopts a new young mutant, the chosen individual comes to live in the X-Mansion, a school administered by Professor X for the purpose of teaching each teenager about his or her body, how it works, and how they are unique beings. The X-Men comics are primarily about one's acceptance of his or her body, and each character's journey is an internal one. Postmodern in nature, this sentiment stands in direct opposition to the modernist mentality embodied by Superman. As he flies over Metropolis, his costume, full of primary colors, acts as a beacon, alerting people to his presence and thereby soothing them. In Marvel's *Ultimate X-Men* the heroes no longer even wear uniforms, for postmodern youth are more concerned with stabilizing one's self through an internal experience of the body, grounded, in part, in pain than with the "soothing" effect produced by external visual cues. In postmodern culture, tattoos and piercings are the experiences youth use to initiate these mind/body interactions. Although the skin is a "surface" element, it acts as a stand-in for the body as a whole, and thus any modifications enacted upon the skin serve to reinforce the modifier's dominance over his entire person.

The X-Men were the first mutant superheroes, and they remain the most popular to this day. When they debuted, the comic book cover billed them as "The Most Unusual Teenagers Of All Time!" In true mutant style, the X-Men's powers are constantly

Figure 3.2 Nightcrawler as he appeared in the movie *X2*. (Courtesy Fox Pictures)

changing, ebbing, and expanding, sometimes with visible and dangerous consequences. Wolverine, the breakout star of the group, is endowed with animal-like senses as well as an accelerated healing factor that allows him to instantly heal from nearly any wound. An experimental group known as Weapon X used this mutation to graft an unbreakable metal alloy called adamantium directly onto Wolverine's bones with no ill effects, giving him a virtually indestructible skeleton as well as claws. In one story arc, the X-Men's arch nemesis, Magneto, extracts all the adamantium from Wolverine's bones through his pores. As the story progresses it becomes apparent that the adamantium, when it was in his body, had suppressed his animal mutations enough to stop them from dominating his body. Without the dampening effects of the metal, Wolverine becomes more feral, finally losing nearly all human reason. Wolverine's body, if left in a natural, unadulterated state, becomes a "sign of disorder" (Bukatman 69). Unlike Superman's body, Wolverine cannot bring his physical form under submission through sheer willpower. Modifying forces are required to subdue his physique, bringing order and harmony to his mind and body. Although his body is "his" no matter what, Wolverine's body modifications, in a very real sense, give him his body back (Figure 3.3). Without them his body and mind war against each other. Each time Wolverine uses his modifications (each time his claws pop out of his forearm), his tendons and skin are torn. The pain is a visceral reminder of the modifications themselves, and each time he feels them an unspoken language is triggered in his mind expressing his relationship to the modifications, what they do for him, and how they benefit his perception of reality.

Figure 3.3 Wolverine quickly became the most popular mutant. (Courtesy Marvel Comics)

The importance of pain in relation to the contemporary body modification culture is closely tied to the need for bodily control. No matter how we may attempt to manipulate or master our bodies, the fact is that in the end they will fail. At some point, the body will cease to function, and no amount of modification will ever stop that. Ultimately, the fantasy perpetrated by Superman, in which the mind can fully achieve dominance over the flesh, is a falsehood for mere mortal man, though it might very well be possible for Kryptonians. To the average teenager in contemporary America, the predicament of Wolverine and his mutant friends is far more captivating. The ritual practice of tattooing and piercing is, on one hand, about the symbolic figures being etched into the skin, and on the other about the pain being endured to do so. By willingly submitting to such a modification, the very stages of this practice (the original piercing or abrasion, the resultant blood flow, the healing of the wound, and the scars left behind) combine to form a "symbolic practice of great power, permitting a rich and complex meditation on issues of agency, autonomy and control" (Benson 245). Once completed, the images or metal attachments left behind by the process will forever memorialize a story onto the skin, but they will also stand as a reminder of the immediate *feeling* of the body, and that the body was conquered for a brief period of time. As body modifier Ed Hardy tells Andrea Juno in an interview, "If there had been no pain, then the tattoo on my shoulder might as well have been house paint" (51). Wolverine is an intentional representative of the new attitude towards body control. Each time a tattoo becomes emblazoned on a teenager's skin, or a metal bar pierces their ear a dialog is instigated between their minds and bodies

that results in a new understanding of self, and Wolverine's use of his painful modifications mimics this interaction.

Superhero narratives are easily definable examinations of certain ideologies or social situations. Subtlety is not the strength of the superhero genre. Richard Reynolds, in his book *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, draws much the same conclusion when he writes that superheroes are generally good for two things: power fantasies, and "examining society through the window of their own peculiar viewpoint" (74). The X-Men comics are placed within an America "in which the possibilities of Americannes [sic] have begun to unravel," and they speak to the postmodern, splintered viewpoint of the modern teenager (Trushell 162). In relation to the X-Men comics, Superman's "peculiar viewpoint" is decidedly dated and narrow. As Reynolds goes on to conclude, Superman is good at one thing, and that is "being American", the very thing the X-Men comics insinuate is passé. Superman's six-word slogan, "truth, justice and the American way," encapsulates the social points that he, as a character, is equipped to discuss. From his super-powered muscles, to his flight, to his indelible skin, Superman was fine tuned to assimilate into American culture as if he were natural born. To that end, Superman was built to be free of all personal sense of history, right down to the pristine, flawless skin surrounding his perfectly controlled anatomy. The one aspect of his past that survives, Kryptonite, causes him harm and even threatens to kill him. Superman is not about self-expression but upward mobility.

It is precisely this cultural solidarity at the expense of personal expression and history that sits so badly with postmodern youth. Teenagers today are coming of age in a

culture that has seen fit to toss aside its history as quickly as it can, and they now long for history of their own more than they long for upward mobility. It is primarily for this reason that Superman now finds himself facing a certain kind of extinction. Never will The Man of Steel fully leave America's consciousness. He is too fixed in our minds as the ultimate hero, but the modern American teenager is inclined now to associate with other comic characters at the expense of Superman. Mutants, Bukatman reminds us, are everything Superman is not. First, they "are not invulnerable," and second, "not only are they distinguished by (a frequently maudlin) emotionalism, but their first and most dangerous enemies are their own bodies" (Bukatman 66). By fixating on the body, the X-Men comics promote the postmodern ideas that the body is important to one's sense of self, and that one's position in society can best be understood by turning one's focus inward, not outward. As Jameson reminds us, postmodern culture in America looks not for the coming of "new worlds," but "breaks and splits" in society. Postmodern America, unlike modernist America, is culturally fragmented, exhibiting no agreed upon definition about what being American actually entails. Today's teenagers do not expect the world around them to reflect or sympathize with their struggles. The X-Men, operating on the same principle, are primarily concerned with how their powers affect their appearance and interaction with their fellow man. In this way, the X-Men actively embrace the sensibilities of contemporary postmodern identity construction.

Superman was a brilliant creation. Siegel and Shuster pulled from disparate mythologies and mediums to create a type of story telling (and a type of hero) that would revolutionize pop culture forever, yet the fact remains that he was structured for his time.

His body was the body 1938 America needed. On account of his ceaseless hard work for the good of others, he acted as a focal point for an entire country pulling itself out of the mire of a depression. Today, he still has the power to create within a reader a sense of awe, but the vitality of his connection stops there. The cultural pressures contemporary youth face today might not be empirically worse than those faced in 1938, but they are phenomenally different. Youth feel at odds with their bodies and with their surroundings. They are not concerned about big, flashy assertions of what the future has in store. Instead, they internalize the pain of body modifying and use those experiences as a form of control. Superman cannot relate to postmodern youth without changing vital aspects of his character. In essence, he would have to become something other than Superman to speak to American teenagers the way Wolverine, Nightcrawler, Cyclops and the rest of the X-Men do.

Superman will, hopefully, forever be around fighting for truth and justice. America needs stalwart heroes in its pop literature who it can depend on to never change, but while Superman might provide reassurance in a time of crisis, the everyday, angst-ridden lives of American teenage boys will be devoted to characters that share their same insecurities, embarrassments, and social troubles. The past might belong to Superman, but the future, it seems, truly belongs to the mutants, for Superman succeeded as a modern comic-book hero, but fails as a postmodern one.

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Appendix A: Comic Book Terminology

Gold Age:

A period in the history of American comic books lasting from 1938 until the late 1950s. During this time comic books enjoyed a surge of popularity, the archetype of the superhero was created and defined, and many of the most famous superheroes debuted.

Silver Age:

An informal name for the period of artistic advancement and commercial success in mainstream American comic books, predominantly in the superhero genre, that lasted roughly from the late 1950s/early 1960s to the early 1970s. During the Silver Age, the character make-up of superheroes evolved. Writers injected science fiction concepts into the origins and adventures of superheroes. More importantly, superheroes became more human and troubled, and since the Silver Age, character development and personal conflict have been almost as important to a superhero's mythos as super powers and epic adventures.

Modern Age:

An informal name for the period of American comic books generally considered lasting from the mid-1980s until present day. In this period, comic book characters generally became darker and more psychologically complex, independent comics flourished, and larger publishing houses became more commercialized.

Reboot:

To restart the continuity of a book or character. To reintroduce the character as if s/he is a new character. Sometimes these reboots are done retroactively, sometimes they are in continuity.

Retcon:

Short for "retroactive continuity." This happens when something which works a profound change on the character(s) is introduced retroactively, but without completely rebooting the character(s).

Continuity:

Refers to the continuing back-story of a character, built up over many issues, years and even decades.

Guest Appearance or Team-Up:

Often referred to as a "crossover," this is the appearance of a character in a title belonging to someone else.

Panels:

The individual pictures that make up a comic book page. Not "frames."

Appendix B: Sales Figure Calculations

ICv2 explains their sales figures: "These estimates are based on ICv2 estimates of comic sales by Diamond North America. The estimates are of actual sales by Diamond U.S. (primarily to North American comic stores), using Diamond's published sales indexes and publisher sales data to estimate a sales number for Batman (the anchor title Diamond uses in its calculations), and using that number and the indexes to estimate Diamond's sales on the remaining titles. The numbers for Batman are within 1/10 of 1% of each other, ensuring a high degree of accuracy." Diamond distributes 100% of Marvel and DC Comic's titles to specialty and retail stores.

Appendix C: Compiled Sales Figures

The sales figures on the following pages capture the top selling books in the comic industry between January 2002 and May 2006. For each month the top selling Superman book is listed alongside the top three selling comic books.

Spikes in the sales of Superman are noticeable on this list and bear mention, specifically the sales spike from March 2004 to December 2004 and again when *All Star Superman* is first introduced in November 2005. Superman's increased sales during the nine-month period in 2004 occurred during a year-long story written by Brian Azzarello entitled "For Tomorrow." The story is, in essence, a character assassination, painting Superman as arrogant and angst-ridden. Azzarello essentially projected a toned-down version of Wolverine's attitude on to Superman in an attempt to bring Superman's behavior more in line with the popular comic book heroes of today. *All Star Superman*,

written by famed comic book author Grant Morrison, sold well on its release (as do many debuts starring high profile heroes), and time will tell if it can maintain such numbers. It is worth noting that aside from these two anomalies, Superman's books consistently rank in the low 20s and 30s in terms of sales.

Appendix C: Compiled Sales Figures

January 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Adventures of Superman #600
Rank: 26
Units Sold: 43,692

Top Three Titles
Batman 10 Cent Adventure
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 654,128

Origin #6
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 166,997

Dark Knight Strikes Again #2
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 155,322

February 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #179
Rank: 32
Units Sold: 38,073

Top Three Titles
Dark Knight Strikes Again #3
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 171,546

Ultimates #2
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 107,342

New X-Men #123
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 105,642

March 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #180
Rank: 28
Units Sold: 39,123

Top Three Titles
New X-Men #124
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 104,138

Ultimates #3
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 102,956

Ultimate X-Men #16
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 96,150

April 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #181
Rank: 40
Units Sold: 37,883

Top Three Titles
Transformers Gen. One #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 119,251

New X-Men #125
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 104,185

Ultimates #4
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 103,153

May 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #182
Rank: 38
Units Sold: 38,327

Top Three Titles
Transformers Gen. One #2
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 115,655

New X-Men #126
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 103,189

Ultimates #5
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 102,524

June 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #183

Top Three Titles
Transformers Gen. One #3

Spider-Man/Black Cat #1

New X-Men #127

Rank: 40
Units Sold: 37,926

	Rank	Units Sold
	1	131,586
	2	118,204
	3	99,672

July 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #184
Rank: 36
Units Sold: 38,129

Top Three Titles

Title	Rank	Units Sold
Transformers Armada #1	1	135,930
Transformers Gen. One #4	2	126,124
Battle of the Planets #1	3	109,797

August 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #185
Rank: 51
Units Sold: 36,661

Top Three Titles

Title	Rank	Units Sold
Fantastic Four #60	1	705,109
Transformers Gen. One #5	2	122,829
Ultimates #8	3	112,570

September 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #186
Rank: 42
Units Sold: 37,198

Top Three Titles

Title	Rank	Units Sold
Transformers Gen. One #6	1	119,533
Ultimates #8	2	103,998
New X-Men #132	3	99,001

October 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #187
Rank: 42
Units Sold: 35,252

Top Three Titles

Title	Rank	Units Sold
Batman #608	1	113,061
Ultimates #9	2	102,829
Transformers War Within #1	3	99,528

November 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #188
Rank: 45
Units Sold: 33,758

Top Three Titles

Title	Rank	Units Sold
Masters of the Universe #1	1	104,971
Daredevil Target #1	2	99,105
Ultimates #10	3	98,164

December 1, 2002

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #189

Top Three Titles

Title
Ultimate War #1
Ultimate War #2
Batman #610

Rank: 46
Units Sold: 34,488

Rank: 1
Units Sold: 122,884

Rank: 2
Units Sold: 116,013

Rank: 3
Units Sold: 93,789

January 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Adventures of Superman #612
Rank: 48
Units Sold: 30,707

Top Three Titles
Batman #611
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 120,042

Ultimate War #3
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 109,415

Ultimate Spider-Man #34
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 106,417

February 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #190
Rank: 46
Units Sold: 31,937

Top Three Titles
Batman #612
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 125,095

Ultimate War #4
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 108,295

Ultimates #9
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 101,490

March 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #191
Rank: 47
Units Sold: 34,000

Top Three Titles
Batman #613
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 135,242

Ultimate Spider-Man #38
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 112,562

Ultimate Spider-Man #37
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 112,318

April 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #192
Rank: 52
Units Sold: 34,638

Top Three Titles
Batman #614
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 153,128

Transformers Gen. One #1
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 111,355

Ultimate Spider-Man #39
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 103,531

May 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #193
Rank: 46
Units Sold: 34,927

Top Three Titles
Wolverine #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 158,787

Batman #615
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 144,090

Ultimates #10
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 105,546

June 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #194
Rank: 45

Top Three Titles
Batman #616
Rank: 1

Ultimate X-Men #34
Rank: 2

Ultimate Spider-Man #42
Rank: 3

July 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman: Birthright #1
Rank: 30
Units Sold: 48,789

Top Three Titles
Batman #617
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 146,601

Spectacular Spider-Man #1
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 118,805

Ultimate X-Men #35
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 109,687

August 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman: Birthright #2
Rank: 31
Units Sold: 42,461

Top Three Titles
Marvel 1601 #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 150,569

Batman #618
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 147,126

Superman/Batman #1
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 134,135

September 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman: Birthright #3
Rank: 39
Units Sold: 41,565

Top Three Titles
Batman #619
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 233,775

JLA/Avengers #1
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 189,919

Marvel 1602 #2
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 132,737

October 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman: Birthright #4
Rank: 49
Units Sold: 41,258

Top Three Titles
JLA/Avengers #2
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 162,297

Amazing Spider-Man #500
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 148,928

Marvel 1602 #3
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 129,456

November 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman: Birthright #5
Rank: 37
Units Sold: 39,749

Top Three Titles
JLA/Avengers #3
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 148,196

Marvel 1602 #4
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 122,683

Wolverine The End #1
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 116,209

December 1, 2003

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #200
Rank: 36
Units Sold: 33,563

Top Three Titles
Ultimate Fantastic Four #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 141,736

Marvel 1602 #5
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 110,753

New X-Men #150
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 100,151

Units Sold: 47,346

Units Sold: 173,441

Units Sold: 115,517

Units Sold: 110,591

January 1, 2004
Top Solo Superman Title
Superman: Birthright #6
Rank: 36
Units Sold: 36,831

Top Three Titles
Ultimate Fantastic Four #2
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 126,693

New X-Men #151
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 124,012

New X-Men #152
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 118,099

February 1, 2004
Top Solo Superman Title
Adventures of Superman #625
Rank: 26
Units Sold: 52,055

Top Three Titles
New X-Men #153
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 113,879

Ultimate Fantastic Four #3
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 109,801

Marvel 1602 #7
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 104,067

March 1, 2004
Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #203
Rank: 13
Units Sold: 83,096

Top Three Titles
Superman/Batman #8
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 146,908

JLA/Avengers #4
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 143,565

New X-Men #154
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 117,253

April 1, 2004
Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #204
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 231,411

Top Three Titles
Superman #204
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 231,411

Superman/Batman #9
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 145,072

Marvel Knights Spider-Man #1
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 137,314

May 1, 2004
Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #205
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 209,389

Top Three Titles
Astonishing X-Men #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 208,105

Superman #205
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 208,105

Superman/Batman #10
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 178,865

June 1, 2004
Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #206
Rank: 2

Top Three Titles
Identity Crisis #1
Rank: 1

Superman #206
Rank: 2

Astonishing X-Men #2
Rank: 3

Units Sold: 162,095

Units Sold: 163,111

Units Sold: 133,784

July 1, 2004

Top Solo Superman Title

Superman #204
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 231,411

Top Three Titles

Superman #204
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 231,411

Superman/Batman #9
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 137,314

Marvel Knights Spider-Man #1
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 133,784

August 1, 2004

Top Solo Superman Title

Superman #208
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 231,411

Top Three Titles

Astonishing X-Men #4
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 145,543

Superman #208
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 129,256

Identity Crisis #3
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 124,601

September 1, 2004

Top Solo Superman Title

Superman #209
Rank: 4
Units Sold: 116,827

Top Three Titles

Superman/Batman #12
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 139,516

Astonishing X-Men #5
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 131,552

Identity Crisis #4
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 128,837

October 1, 2004

Top Solo Superman Title

Superman #210
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 113,480

Top Three Titles

Identity Crisis #5
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 125,637

Wolverine #20
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 116,831

Superman #210
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 113,480

November 1, 2004

Top Solo Superman Title

Superman #211
Rank: 5
Units Sold: 106,469

Top Three Titles

Superman/Batman #13
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 157,949

Astonishing X-Men #6
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 134,840

Identity Crisis #6
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 132,384

December 1, 2004

Top Solo Superman Title

Superman #212
Rank: 8

Top Three Titles

New Avengers #1
Rank: 1

Ultimates #2
Rank: 2

Identity Crisis #7
Rank: 3

Units Sold: 100,244

Units Sold: 240,724

Units Sold: 146,271

Units Sold: 139,572

January 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Adventures of Superman #636
Rank: 37
Units Sold: 39,253

Top Three Titles
New Avengers #2
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 153,751

Ultimates 2 #2
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 113,379

X-Men Pheonix Endsong #1
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 108,466

February 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #213
Rank: 6
Units Sold: 101,258

Top Three Titles
New Avengers #3
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 148,973

Astonishing X-Men #8
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 134,134

Superman Batman #17
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 116,367

March 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #214
Rank: 7
Units Sold: 100,943

Top Three Titles
Countdown To Infinite Crisis #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 199,704

New Avengers #4
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 155,113

Ultimate Iron Man #1
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 138,753

April 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #215
Rank: 5
Units Sold: 112,593

Top Three Titles
New Avengers #5
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 162,412

Superman Batman #18
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 115,305

Green Lantern Rebirth #5
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 115,006

May 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #216
Rank: 16
Units Sold: 70,205

Top Three Titles
Green Lantern #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 168,353

Astonishing X-Men #10
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 134,986

Green Lantern Rebirth #6
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 114,354

June 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #218
Rank: 25

Top Three Titles
House of M #1
Rank: 1

House of M #2
Rank: 2

New Avengers #6
Rank: 3

Units Sold: 61,515

Units Sold: 233,763

Units Sold: 168,974

Units Sold: 161,575

July 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #219
Rank: 24
Units Sold: 71,036

Top Three Titles
All Star Batman & Robin #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 261,046

New Avengers #7
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 158,693

House of M #3
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 151,744

August 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #220
Rank: 31
Units Sold: 61,264

Top Three Titles
Justice #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 190,424

New Avengers #8
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 156,037

New Avengers #9
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 145,673

September 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #221
Rank: 27
Units Sold: 69,065

Top Three Titles
All Star Batman & Robin #2
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 178,592

New Avengers #10
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 143,014

House Of M #6
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 138,131

October 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #222
Rank: 21
Units Sold: 71,036

Top Three Titles
Infinite Crisis #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 249,265

House of M #7
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 134,429

New Avengers #12
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 127,949

November 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
All Star Superman #1
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 170,802

Top Three Titles
Infinite Crisis #2
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 207,564

All Star Superman #1
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 170,802

House Of M #8
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 135,462

December 1, 2005

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #224
Rank: 25

Top Three Titles
Infinite Crisis #3
Rank: 1

All Star Batman & Robin #3
Rank: 2

New Avengers #14
Rank: 3

Units Sold: 63,719

Units Sold: 188,853

Units Sold: 162,993

Units Sold: 124,300

January 1, 2006

Top Solo Superman Title
All Star Superman #2
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 124,328

Top Three Titles
Infinite Crisis #4
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 182,633

New Avengers #16
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 121,492

New Avengers #15
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 121,758

February 1, 2006

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #226
Rank: 23
Units Sold: 63,982

Top Three Titles
Astonishing X-Men #13
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 140,655

New Avengers #17
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 121,098

All Star Superman #2
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 124,328

March 1, 2006

Top Solo Superman Title
All Star Superman #3
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 110,585

Top Three Titles
Infinite Crisis #5
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 210,855

Wolverine Origins #1
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 150,283

Justice #4
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 110,488

April 1, 2006

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #651
Rank: 14
Units Sold: 73,355

Top Three Titles
Infinite Crisis #6
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 194,431

Infinite Crisis #7
Rank: 2
Units Sold: 198,442

All Star Superman #3
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 110,585

May 1, 2006

Top Solo Superman Title
Superman #652
Rank: 28
Units Sold: 70,458

Top Three Titles
Civil War #1
Rank: 1
Units Sold: 260,804

New Avengers #18
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 121,550

All Star Batman & Robin #4
Rank: 3
Units Sold: 160,401

Total: 4,020,282
Average: 75,854
From #1: -109,258

#1 Total: 9,810,950
#1 Average: 185,112