

## **“Here They Come to Save the Day” – The New Sincerity in 1990s American Superhero Comics**

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**ABSTRACT:** After the success of postmodern superhero comics that deconstructed heroism in post-Vietnam, post-Watergate USA, mid-1990s comics experienced a resurgence in unabashedly heroic narratives. This coincided with David Foster Wallace’s call for post-irony and the emergence of New Sincerity, a post-postmodern trend that aims to break with cynicism. I will argue that these superhero comics are inherently nostalgic, drawing on tropes, storylines, and characters from the Silver Age comics of the 1950s and 60s. Discussing this dispute between postmodern cynicism and New Sincerity, a lens through which the current political and cultural landscape can be analyzed and dissected, will shed light on the origin and nature of two opposing narrative trends that have been increasingly shaping American culture, society, and politics.

**KEYWORDS:** New Sincerity; Nostalgia; Superhero comics; Post-irony; Post-postmodernism

### **Introduction: Putting the Superhero Back Together**

Borrowing from the Greek concept of the Ages of Man, comic book fans, historians, and scholars use the notion of metallic ages to subdivide the history of American superhero comic books. The so-called Golden Age lasted from Superman’s first appearance in *Action Comics #1* (1938) to the late 1940s or early 1950s when the genre’s popularity waned and most superhero titles were cancelled. This period was marked by stories about anti-establishment “social crusading” (Tye 49) and World War II (Johnson 7-48). In the wake of congressional hearings on the relationship between comic books and juvenile delinquency, the Comics Code Authority was set up in 1954 to censor the industry’s output. This led to the Silver Age with its focus on colorful characters, family-friendly and moralizing stories about outlandish science-fiction adventures, silly humor, and respect for established authority (*Ibid.* 69-85). The Silver Age was followed by the Bronze Age in the early 1970s which returned to the Golden Age ideal of social relevancy, including stories about drug abuse, poverty, and racism (*Ibid.* 103-124).

In the mid-1980s, comic books like Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen* (1986-87) and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) ushered in an era of postmodernist deconstruction of the superhero narrative. The hitherto clear-cut distinction between heroes and villains, belief in moral absolutes, and adherence to the Comics Code was replaced by moral relativism, mature content, and the introduction of artistic and literary innovations that favored ambiguity, such as collages, neo-expressionism, and self-referentiality. This

ironic and cynical mode of addressing the concept of heroism dominated American mainstream comics<sup>1</sup> for approximately ten years (Johnson 125-165). However, in the mid-1990s, comic book creators like Kurt Busiek, Grant Morrison, and Alex Ross aimed to reconstruct a heroic narrative, combining nostalgia for the four-color Silver Age comics of their childhood with some of the artistic and literary innovations introduced by Moore, Miller, and Bill Sienkiewicz in the 1980s. Busiek sums up the central tension of 1990s American superhero comics between postmodern deconstruction and post-postmodern reconstruction in the introduction to his comic book series *Astro City* as follows: “We’ve been taking apart the superhero for ten years or more; it’s time to put it back together” (9). According to Busiek, the superhero genre had come to be seen as a simplistic “crypto-fascist presentation of status-quo values” (*Ibid.* 7) that needed to be deconstructed to “show [superhero comics] for the unworkable Rube Goldberg machines they are” (*Ibid.* 9). However, he argues that if they were able to act as a metaphor for the self-image of a nation in 1941, then they can be changed to fulfil the same function today. What the genre needs, according to Busiek, is not the further deconstruction and eventual abandonment of “What Happens Next” but instead the adaptation and reimagining of “What Else Is There” (*Ibid.* 8). Therefore, Busiek likens the deconstruction of superheroes to taking a machine apart. It is useful to find out how it works and then build a better version.

The emergence of this post-postmodern movement coincided with the publication of *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*, an essay written by David Foster Wallace in 1993 that calls for an end to postmodern irony, i.e. self-deprecating humour, self-referentiality, cynicism, and irreverence. As a uniquely American art form, superhero comics have always reflected trends in US culture and society. What does this turn against relativism say about American culture in the mid-1990s? Does an age of cynicism heighten the appeal of classic heroes? I will argue that comics like Busiek and Ross’s *Marvels* (1994), Mark Waid and Ross’s *Kingdom Come* (1996), and Morrison’s *JLA* (1997-2000) espouse some of the ideas David Foster Wallace laid out in his manifesto for post-ironic works and that they can be considered part of a wider cultural movement sometimes referred to as “New Sincerity”.<sup>2</sup>

## **Rejecting Postmodern Irony: The New Sincerity and Nostalgia**

In his essay, David Foster Wallace argues that postmodern irony has become the dominant feature of American fiction. However, while early postmodernists used irony as a liberating,

<sup>1</sup> According to Doug Singsen, mainstream comics “have typically been defined by their portrayal of superheroes [...] while alternative comics have conversely been defined by the absence of superheroes” (3). Due to various exceptions to this rule, this article further specifies mainstream comics as superhero comics published by the “Big Two” – namely, Marvel and DC Comics.

<sup>2</sup> Works on this movement include Adam Kelly’s analysis of David Foster Wallace’s influence on American fiction, Jim Collins’s adoption of the concept for early 1990s American cinema, and a widely discussed *The Atlantic* article by Jonathan D. Fitzgerald.

destructive feature because they believed “that revelation of imprisonment yielded freedom” (Wallace 67), Wallace deems irony useless to construct a replacement for the hypocrisy it debunks. Instead, the established genre absorbs insurgent texts, institutionalizing irony. Rebels “just become better tyrants” (*Ibid.*) because it is almost impossible to rebel against an aesthetic of rebellion. Wallace likens institutionalized irony to people despising “their spouses or jobs” (29) without splitting up or quitting, a paradoxical simultaneity of hate, fear, and need. To accommodate these contradictions, television viewers, the subjects of his analysis, watch ready to impose irony as a precaution. This precaution allows viewers who want sameness but think they ought to want novelty to watch television with a mixture of devotion and sneer, giving them permission to despise TV without giving it up.

In the last paragraph of his manifesto for post-ironic fiction, Wallace calls for future writers to “have the childish gall actually to [sic] endorse single-entendre values” (81) and to “treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction” (*Ibid.*). Risking the disapproval of cynical postmodernists to whom their fiction would seem outdated and too sincere, as well as risking “accusations of sentimentality,” yawns, rolling eyes, and “the parody of gifted ironists” (*Ibid.*), these anti-rebels would be the real rebels. Wallace’s criticism that irony, while entertaining, is an agent of despair and stasis is mirrored by the New Sincerity view that deconstruction in comic books had been effective but had also led to a formulaic approach towards cynicism and relativism that resulted in a static narrative unable to move beyond its self-deprecating irony.

This rejection of postmodern irony led to the co-existence of Silver Age nostalgia and New Sincerity as the defining traits of mid-1990s superhero comics. Based on Lionel Trilling’s *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Adam Kelly defines sincerity as “truth to the self [which] is conceived of as a means of ensuring truth to the other” (132). According to Trilling, the ideal of sincerity persisted as the dominant characteristic of Western culture from the Renaissance until the twentieth century when it was “superseded by the ideal of authenticity” which emphasizes “truth to the self as an end and not simply as a means” (*Ibid.*). An authentic “exploration of the self characteristic of literary modernism” presents truth as something inward and personal that can only be attained through self-expression, “[w]hereas sincerity places emphasis on inter-subjective truth and communication” (*Ibid.*). Along with “the New Critical denigration of intention, so central to” (*Ibid.*) Trilling’s concept of sincerity, and the rise of post-structuralism and postmodernism, this leads to a cultural environment that speaks of sincerity “with either discomfort or irony” (Trilling qtd. in Kelly 133). A movement following David Foster Wallace’s call to reject irony and embrace sincerity in a hostile postmodernist environment would therefore have to “relinquish the self to the judgement of the other” (*Ibid.* 145) rather than continue a postmodern judgement of the

reader. Writers whose fiction has been characterized as New Sincerity include Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and Michael Chabon.<sup>3</sup>

The New Sincerity's rejection of postmodernism with its focus on moral relativism, self-referentiality, subjectivity, nihilism, deconstruction, and cynical irony amounts to a renewed embrace of historical materialism, i.e. a belief that there is a world beyond our individual senses, that humans have agency, and that, therefore, the world can be changed. In his video essay "David Foster Wallace – The Problem with Irony," Will Schoder traces this transition to John Stewart's "unwavering sincerity" (7:53) following *Saturday Night Live's* "deconstructionist cynicism" (Schoder 2:50) and David Letterman, whom Wallace famously labelled "the ironic '80s' true Angel of Death" (Wallace 62). Discussing the emergence of New Sincerity, Schoder argues that *Seinfeld's* show-about-nothing approach with its absurdist, unsolvable problems has been replaced by sentimental sitcoms that focus on the redeeming qualities of communal experience like *Community* and *Modern Family*.

However, this strict juxtaposition between cynical postmodernism and sincere post-irony has to be questioned. Discussing the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Thomas Pynchon's debut novel *V.*, Alexander Nazaryan acknowledges that "though we think of Pynchon as the progenitor of postmodern irony, the novel's central theme ... is one of sly but unmistakable sincerity: 'Keep cool but care.'" (n. pag.). Therefore, it is important to point out that in his manifesto for post-irony, David Foster Wallace is not generally opposing irony and postmodernism but rather the "oppressiveness of institutionalized irony" (68). According to Wallace, irony's usefulness lies in its destructive nature which can be used to topple an oppressive status-quo; however, it must be followed by a new sincerity to construct something new in its place. A society that stops short of moving beyond irony promotes a system of perpetual destruction that causes "despair and stasis" (Wallace 49). The New Sincerity does not reject postmodernism; rather, it adds this next stage of sincere reconstruction. New Sincerity sitcoms like *Community* (2009-15), *Modern Family* (2009-), and *Rick and Morty* (2013-) use characteristics of postmodernism, including self-referentiality, irony, and pop cultural references, but additionally rely on sincerity, sentimentality, and inter-subjectivity. Similarly, the New Sincerity comics of the 1990s do not merely emulate the Silver Age but oscillate between the innovation of postmodern deconstruction and a renewed emphasis on the aforementioned aspects, signaling a shift within postmodernism that re-evaluates the past rather than returning to it.

As already mentioned, the second defining trait of comics like *Marvels*, *Kingdom Come*, and *JLA* is nostalgia. In his essay "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films" (1979), John G. Cawelti defines the evocation of nostalgia as a mode that deploys "traditional generic features of plot, character, setting and style [...] to recreate the aura of a

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan D. Fitzgerald, author of *Not Your Mother's Morals: How the New Sincerity is Changing Pop Culture for the Better*, also lists filmmakers Judd Apatow and Wes Anderson, musicians Arcade Fire, Vampire Weekend, and Frank Ocean, and the TV show *Modern Family* as examples of the genre (n.pag.).

past time" (571). It creates "a sense of warm reassurance by [evoking] a time when things seemed more secure and full of promise and possibility" (*Ibid.*). However, a nostalgic work of art "cannot simply duplicate the past experience, but must make us aware [...] of the relationship between past and present" (*Ibid.*). Cawelti mentions Fred Zinneman's *True Grit* (1969) as an example that succeeds in "giving us both a sense of contemporaneity and of pastness" (571-572)<sup>4</sup> by portraying an aging John Wayne, a "contemporary image of adolescent girlhood" in its portrayal of Mattie Ross (572), and a de-romanticized Western landscape, while at the same time narrating "the same old story of adventure and heroism culminating in an exuberant [sic] shootout which seemed to embody everybody's best dreams of Saturday matinees" (*Ibid.*). Cawelti distinguishes between the evocation of nostalgia present in films like *True Grit* and "the use of traditional generic structures as a means of demythologization" (*Ibid.*). While demythologization evokes nostalgia as a tool to ironically comment on a genre, for works like *True Grit*, the evocation of nostalgia seems to be their goal.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym distinguishes between restorative and reflective nostalgia. While restorative nostalgia relies on "invented traditions" and is characterized by Manichean battles and the erasure of ambivalence and complexity to restore perceived origins (Boym 41-43), reflective nostalgia combines longing and critical thinking and can even be humorous in how it portrays customs (*Ibid.* 49-50). That the New Sincerity's nostalgia for Silver Age comics does not equal 1950s conservatism is reinforced by Boym's suggestion that nostalgia is never "for the past the way it was, but [...] the way it could have been" (*Ibid.* 351). New Sincerity comics combine both a partial erasure of ambivalence and reflective critical thinking. While they return to the Manichean battles of the Silver Age and restore clear-cut heroism, they also integrate postmodernism's legacy of critical thinking, questioning specific ideals of heroism, but not heroism itself. The supposedly backward-looking New Sincerity creators were, for instance, among the most vocal critics of misogyny and racism in American comics.<sup>5</sup> As part of their rejection of cynical and gratuitous portrayals of violence, sex, and moral relativism, Grant Morrison and other New Sincerity creators criticized the alleged sexism, racism, and homophobia in the works of Alan Moore, Frank Miller, and Rob Liefeld.<sup>6</sup>

Jim Collins explores the relationship between nostalgia and New Sincerity in his 1993 essay "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity" that names Phil Alden Robinson's *Field of Dreams* (1989), Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and Steven Spielberg's *Hook* (1991) as early examples of this movement. Rather than engaging in what

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<sup>4</sup> Sam Peckinpah's early Western film *Ride the High Country* and Dick Richard's neo-noir Raymond Chandler adaptation *Farewell, My Lovely* are further successful examples, according to Cawelti (507).

<sup>5</sup> Particularly Grant Morrison's public feud with Alan Moore over the latter's portrayal of women in comics is a well-known example of this divide (Hiatt, n.pag.).

<sup>6</sup> Specific examples include Miller's *Sin City* (1991-92), Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988), and Liefeld's *Avengeleyne* (1995).

Collins terms the “hybridization” of postmodern eclectic irony, these films “all [attempt] [...] to recover a lost ‘purity,’ which apparently pre-existed even the Golden Age of film genre” (245). Therefore, the New Sincerity’s rejection of postmodern irony is intimately connected to a nostalgic retreat toward an impossible past “in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity” (Collins 257). The impossible past as a commentary on the present is always a reflection on the potentials of what could have been instead of what was, shining the light on what is desirable in the future. This past is impossible because it is “by definition, a never-never land of pure wish-fulfillment, in which the problems of the present are symbolically resolved in a past that not only did not, but could not exist” (*Ibid.*). This longing for the purity of a “yet-to-be-contaminated folk culture” (*Ibid.* 259), uncorrupted by the cynicism of adulthood, postmodernism, urbanity, and consumerism, presents a genre’s Ur-text as taking on a “quasi-sacred function as the guarantee of authenticity” (*Ibid.*). After shattering the grand narratives of religion, progress, and the Age of Reason, postmodernism led to feelings of alienation. American culture partly countered this condition in the mid-1990s with the reintegration of some of these values into public discourse. While Christian evangelicals had been considered “has-beens” in the past, they now emerged as a powerful voting bloc with considerable influence within the Republican Party. Similarly, the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 signaled a renewed emphasis on progressive ideals and belief in the presidency, breaking with the cynical distrust of the Watergate and Iran-Contra years. America’s longing for “some cause larger than [them]selves” (qtd. in Boyer et al. 973), as Frank Rich puts it, “found expression in bestselling books about past heroes and more heroic times, such as Stephen Ambrose’s *Eisenhower* (1991); David McCullough’s *Truman* (1993); and Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation* (1998)” (Boyer et al. 973). As will be shown, the New Sincerity “offers the recovery of lost purity, the attempt to recapture the elemental simplicity of childhood delight” (Collins 261) either by explicitly setting its comics in an invented past at a quasi-mythical dawn of heroism or through “comparison to the corrupt present” (*Ibid.*).

## **“What’s So Funny about Truth, Justice & the American Way?”: Reconstructing the Superhero**

One of the first examples of New Sincerity in comics, *Marvels*, a four-issue series written by Kurt Busiek with art by Alex Ross published in 1994, opts for portraying a past dawn of heroism. *Marvels* recounts key moments from Marvel Comics publications up until the early 1970s, usually referred to as the end of the Silver Age (Johnson 105-6). The reader revisits these moments from the perspective of news photographer Phil Sheldon. This “everyman” perspective, along with Alex Ross’s fully painted art reminiscent of Norman Rockwell’s *The Saturday Evening Post* cover illustrations<sup>7</sup>, seems to recover a sense of awe comparable to

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<sup>7</sup> The use of real-life models, photorealistic drawings, painted colours, and a perceived tendency to rely on excessively posed splash pages and double-page spreads are some of the features of Ross’s art.

that of children reading the adventures of these larger-than-life characters for the first time, a folk-cultural activity of almost mystical proportions (Fig. 1). *Marvels'* plot consists exclusively of these rehashed moments from Marvel Comics' history, which are presented as adapted homages, with its sources meticulously listed at the end of the collected edition. However, it reframes these heroic moments in a postmodern present of violent anti-heroes as an Ur-text, as a pure and uncorrupted past brought to a sudden end by the loss of innocence.

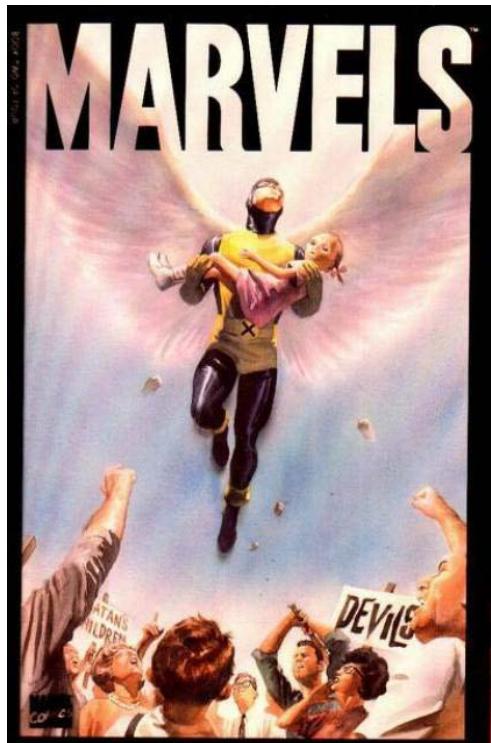


Fig. 1. Cover of *Marvels* #2. Alex Ross's fully painted art reminiscent of American Realism and Norman Rockwell, religious motifs, and a child-like perspective are recurring features of New Sincerity comics.

*Marvels* ends with Gwen Stacy's death, an event originally depicted in "The Night Gwen Stacy Died," published in *Amazing Spider-Man* #121-122 in 1973. This story arc is usually seen as the end of the Silver Age's innocent, family-friendly comics, and the beginning of a more cynical age that eventually resulted in the complete deconstruction of the superhero in the 1980s. Considering that *Marvels* was published in 1994, it is telling that this homage to heroism in the Marvel Universe ends with a storyline published in the early 1970s, neglecting twenty years of comic book history. In doing so, it is the comic book equivalent of David Foster Wallace's manifesto, a call to reject the ironic present and to replace it with a sincere belief in heroism, compassion, and a moral code closer to the heroic past of The Greatest Generation people were longing for. The effects of Vietnam, Kent State, and Watergate were starting to wane and be replaced by the enthusiasm of having won the Cold War and the election of a young, saxophone-playing president.

The “comparison to the corrupt present” is more explicit in *Kingdom Come*, another four-issue series painted by Alex Ross, co-written by him and Mark Waid, which was published by DC Comics in 1996. Set in the future, it depicts the original Justice League, led by Superman and Wonder Woman, who come back from retirement to confront their amoral, violent successors. Led by Magog, these younger superheroes murder villains and eventually cause Captain Atom’s death<sup>8</sup> which results in a nuclear disaster in the American Midwest. The symbolism of the death of a Silver Age superhero is reinforced by the fact that the following nuclear explosion renders “the entire state of Kansas [...] an irradiated wasteland” (Waid and Ross 38). As Dorothy’s and Superman’s childhood home in *The Wizard of Oz* and Silver Age issues of *Superboy* respectively, Kansas represents the innocence of childhood and comics, while it is also known as the American breadbasket with its rural lifestyle and Midwestern values. It therefore unites the concepts of childhood and a “yet to be corrupted pre-industrial, agrarian paradise” (Collins 261) that the New Sincerity locates as the site of heroism’s Ur-text. Magog’s reckless and amoral behavior gives readers the “sense of contemporaneity” that, according to Cawelti, is needed to successfully evoke nostalgia (571-572). It is the contemporaneity of the violent anti-heroes of the late 1980s and early 1990s, contrasted with the pastness of Superman, the Justice League, and their moral code. Instead of demythologizing this pastness, *Kingdom Come* reinforces the notion that it is preferable to the cynical, morally relativist present.

Asked whether Magog was a response to early 1990s anti-heroes, Alex Ross states in an interview with comic book news website *CBR* that Magog’s design was his effort to emulate Rob Liefeld’s style, particularly his Marvel Comics creation Cable: “What I was stealing from was [...] the design of Cable. I hated it. I felt like it looked like they just threw up everything on the character – the scars, the thing going on with his eye, the arm, and what’s with all the guns?” (“Ten Years Later” n.pag.). The conflict between anti-heroes and heroes is repeatedly referenced using religious overtones, particularly the conflict between good and evil. A biblical reference, Magog is mentioned in the Book of Revelation as a herald of the apocalypse who has to be defeated by the Messiah. The analogy between Superman and Jesus Christ is reinforced by Superman’s self-imposed exile before his return to save the world, which on-looking civilians announce with the words “Look! Up in the Sky!” (Waid and Ross 53) using a well-known catchphrase from the 1950s TV series. The Book of Revelation and similar end of time traditions are repeatedly referenced in *Kingdom Come*, beginning with the comic’s title. At the end of “Chapter Three: Up in the Sky,” McCay says that he can “see Ragnarok at last unfold. [...] Armageddon has arrived” (*Ibid.* 153-155), combining Christian eschatology with Norse concepts to emphasize that the heroes who are about to die are our gods, not flawed anti-heroes who need to be ironically deconstructed.

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<sup>8</sup> Co-created by Joe Gill and Steve Ditko for Charlton Comics in 1960, this nuclear-powered hero is an archetypal Silver Age science-fiction character.

While *Marvels* evokes nostalgia, ignoring twenty years of comics, *Kingdom Come* integrates postmodern cynicism into its story to reaffirm the myth of the American superhero. According to Cawelti, this mode of generic transformation explicitly shows that a genre is unreal, “but then the myth itself is at least partially affirmed as a reflection of authentic human aspirations and needs” (509). The collected edition states that *Kingdom Come* is “[d]edicated to Christopher Reeve who makes us believe that a man can fly” (1), evoking the 1978 *Superman* feature film, the cinematic equivalent of the Silver Age seen as the epitome of selfless heroism, as well as Christopher Reeve’s status as an inspirational figure for the American public, albeit one despised by contemporaneous disability rights activists.<sup>9</sup> This dedication foreshadows the comic’s aim to reaffirm the Silver Age myth of heroism, hope, and optimism. While cynics may see these concepts as inadequate for a postmodern present, according to *Kingdom Come* the overall myth has to be partially reaffirmed. Reeve very prominently used this myth of heroism, hope, and optimism to frame his own disability as something to overcome at the Democratic National Convention in 1996, the year the original issues of *Kingdom Come* were published. In “Chapter One: Strange Visitor,” Norman McCay’s last words before Superman’s return are “we need hope!” (Waid and Ross 51), indicating that despite their shortcomings, their pathos, and silly costumes, superheroes and their Ur-text of inspiration, moral guidance, and optimism have to be reaffirmed in times of moral relativism.

As co-creator on both of these works, *Marvels* and *Kingdom Come*, Alex Ross has to be considered one of the defining people of 1990s New Sincerity comics. Ross’s art on *Marvels*, *Kingdom Come*, and *Astro City* evokes the photo-realism of Norman Rockwell and Edward Hopper to several effects. It references mid-century artists, harkening back to the time the Silver Age emerged. This association of realist paintings with America before the advent of postmodernism reinforces the comics’ nostalgia for “a never-never land that is available [...] in an imaginary pre-history or originary moment” (Collins 260). Ross not only tries to emulate the realists’ style but explicitly references some of their paintings. In *Marvels: Book One*, one scene is set in a diner reminiscent of Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks* (1942) with that page’s first panel being an almost identical recreation of Hopper’s painting, merely adding four characters, including the Human Torch, Phil Sheldon, and a young J. Jonah Jameson (Fig. 2 and 3). Hopper, who held on to his realist style despite the emergence of abstract expressionism, is a highly symbolic reference. Not only did he adhere to American Realism, but he did so at a time when relativist deconstruction, an authentic “exploration of the self characteristic of literary modernism” (Kelly 132) instead of the inter-subjective truth of sincerity, began to take center stage in the American art scene. Rockwell, whose work was dismissed by most art critics in his lifetime, is another symbolic influence. Much like

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<sup>9</sup> For context on the problematic nature of Reeves’ public appearances as a disabled person lamenting his tragic fate and advocating for cure instead of access, read Brown, Steven E. “Super Duper? The (Unfortunate) Ascendancy of Christopher Reeves.” *Mainstream: Magazine of the Able-Disabled*, October 1996, [www.independentliving.org/docs3/brown96c.html](http://www.independentliving.org/docs3/brown96c.html). *Independent Living Institute*, Accessed 29 Mar 2019.

Rockwell's illustrations, Silver Age comics represent popular art considered inferior to their "high art" counterparts. Referencing and therefore implicitly identifying with Edward Hopper and Norman Rockwell also suggests that Alex Ross is actively rejecting the postmodernist art of Bill Sienkiewicz and Dave McKean, his critically acclaimed contemporaries.



Fig. 2. Panel from *Marvels* referencing Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. Art by Alex Ross, written by Kurt Busiek (n. pag.).

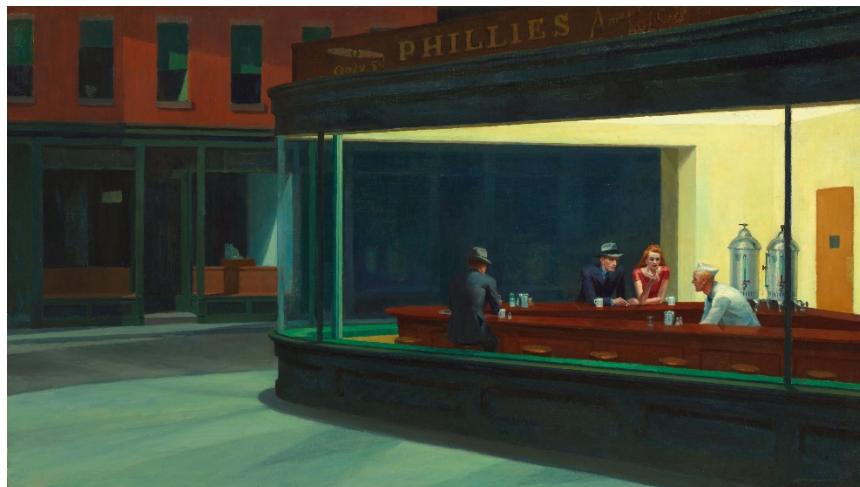


Fig. 3. Edward Hopper's 1942 oil on canvas painting *Nighthawks*. Despite the emergence and mainstream success of abstract expressionism, Hopper held on to American Realism.

Continuing *Kingdom Come*'s approach to integrate postmodernism, thereby reaffirming the heroic myth, Grant Morrison and Howard Porter launched *JLA*, a reboot of *Justice League of America* which itself is considered a mainstay of Silver Age comics, in 1997. Commercially, *JLA* was the most successful reconstruction as it became DC Comics' best-selling title in the late 1990s. It unites DC's seven most popular heroes, namely Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Aquaman, and Martian Manhunter, fighting cosmic threats. This back-to-basics approach with the group's core members from the early 1960s in the Watchtower, their Moon-based headquarters, fighting interstellar, cross-dimensional, and supernatural threats instead of the (pseudo-)authenticity of organized crime, political corruption, and personal tragedies characteristic of the 1980s and early 1990s, heavily

resembled the Silver Age's focus on the fantastic and its belief in progress and heroism. Morrison also stresses the group's return to larger-than-life heroism by depicting the JLA as a pantheon of gods. In *JLA* #5, the team starts recruiting new members, increasing its membership to twelve which equals the number of Olympian gods,<sup>10</sup> literally hovering over humanity in their Watchtower. While *JLA* shares a nostalgic retreat to an impossible past and a sincere belief in heroism with earlier titles like *Marvels* and *Kingdom Come*, it became particularly well-known for its humor. Instead of replacing the postmodern use of satire to ironically expose the genre's deficiencies with a humorless insistence on tired old tropes, Grant Morrison reveled in absurdist humor that celebrated the genre's goofiness. When, in *JLA: Classified* #3, the JLA fight the Ultramarine Corps, the series' embodiment of violent anti-heroes, Superman rejects their postmodern display of moral relativism and cynicism, telling them "these 'no-nonsense' solutions of yours just don't hold water in a complex world of jet-powered apes and time travel" (n. pag.), signaling that the unabashed joy of four-color science-fiction comics is ultimately incompatible with postmodern cynicism.

## **"Holding Out for a Hero": Postmodernism, the New Sincerity, and Heroism in the Trump Years**

David Foster Wallace's criticism of postmodern irony which was echoed by these comic book creators in their quest to find a post-ironic approach to heroism proved to be prophetic in light of recent developments in American society. Now that institutionalized irony has reached the White House, the president co-opts moral relativism and cynicism, rejecting the validity of absolute truths while adopting an aesthetic of rebellion. All these postmodern concepts, useful when they questioned the moral hypocrisy of the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon, and Jerry Falwell, have been co-opted by the establishment to create an oppressive stasis, according to David Foster Wallace (67). While he was talking about American fiction, his call for post-irony reads as a political manifesto in the Trump years. Today's real rebels are those anti-rebels who insist on seemingly outdated concepts like morality, American values, and a sincere belief in the promises of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Their sentimentality, centered on empathy, social justice, democracy, and decency, risks the disapproval of yawns, rolling eyes, and cynical parody.

However, the New Sincerity's close association with nostalgia results in a problematic tension between these goals and an inherent social conservatism. In *The Friday Book*'s introduction to his postmodernist manifesto "The Literature of Exhaustion," John Barth states that "[a] roomful of young traditionalists can be as depressing as a roomful of young Republicans" (64), expressing a common apprehension that a post-ironic return to Silver Age

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<sup>10</sup> While it also equals the number of Christ's disciples, Morrison himself refers to the Olympian analogy in his non-fiction book *Supergods* (2011) where he likens Superman to Zeus, Wonder Woman to Hera, Batman to Hades, the Flash to Hermes, Green Lantern to Apollo, Aquaman to Neptune, and Plastic Man to Dionysus.

sensibilities marks the return of an inherently conservative narrative. David Foster Wallace expresses a similar apprehension about a reactionary response to an ironic aesthetic of rebellion, pointing out that the Reagan and Bush administrations showed that “nostalgia [...] is no less susceptible to manipulation” so that “most of us will still take nihilism over neanderthalism” (185). What comics like *Kingdom Come*, *Marvels*, and *JLA* evoke is a nostalgia for Eisenhower-era, pre-Civil Rights Movement America, when the Silver Age comics were at their peak. It fetishizes values that are rooted in white mid-century America which it implicitly presents as an uncorrupted past, neglecting its backdrop of racial segregation and voiceless sections of the American public. These tensions have partly resulted in specific criticisms directed at New Sincerity works. While *Modern Family* has been heavily criticized for portraying its female characters as stay-at-home moms, and *Dances with Wolves* for portraying Noble Savages whose world “serve[s] as a [...] site for the narcissistic projections of alienated [whites] in the present” (Collins 259), comics like *JLA*, *Kingdom Come*, and *Marvels* reactivate the exclusively white, predominantly male superheroes of the 1950s and ‘60s to define the norms of heroism.

The ambivalent attitude towards superheroes in 1990s comics, with a nostalgic New Sincerity and postmodern cynicism co-existing as competing narratives about heroism, was echoed by similarly contradicting attitudes towards foreign policy and America’s place in the world. Post-Cold War internationalism clashed with a renewed isolationism as the euphoric “triumph” of liberal democracy, exemplified by Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), contradicted the prevailing ironic detachment of the Grunge era with its apathy, aimlessness, and slacker stereotype.<sup>11</sup> While the Clinton administration repeatedly used the past to frame its handling of the Bosnian conflict as consistent with the history of the Transatlantic alliance, large swaths of the American public reacted with indifference. Despite the administration’s part in negotiating the Dayton Accords and the Good Friday Agreement, “only 20 percent of Americans said they followed foreign news” (Boyer et al. 965) in 1997. While the Golden Age coincided with World War II and the Silver Age with the height of the Cold War, this re-emergence of the American superhero seemingly concurred with contradictory attitudes towards larger causes. However, it also preceded the outright interventionism of the War on Terror with the simultaneous start of the superhero film craze.

The significance of David Foster Wallace’s essay as well as *Marvels*, *Kingdom Come*, and *JLA* lies in their early adoption of a public discourse which as of this writing is still unresolved with the continuing co-existence of postmodern sensibilities and a nostalgic New Sincerity. While post-ironic attitudes are often presented as a reaction against 9/11, it is now possible to historicize the mid-1990s roots of this discourse and to examine how the election of Bill Clinton and the end of the Cold War contributed to this development. Which impact did the

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<sup>11</sup> Referring to cynical members of Generation X who are uninterested in politics, social causes, or economic ambition, the term became widely used after the release of Richard Linklater’s film *Slacker* (1990).

emergence of Third Way neoliberalism have on New Sincerity artists whose work is often dismissed as bourgeois kitsch? Are there differences between the New Sincerity and the Silver Age that point to distinct understandings of masculinity, whiteness, and America's place in the world? Embedded in the above-mentioned criticism and historical context, a closer examination of the re-emergence of heroism in 1990s superhero comics as a rejection of dominant postmodern sensibilities could prove to be a valuable contribution to comics studies.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Incidentally, this is the trajectory of my dissertation which hopes to contribute to the burgeoning discussion of New Sincerity and to be the first instance of its application to American superhero comics.

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