

NC 0020578 8



JOHN O' SULLIVAN
4TH YEAR VISUAL COMMUNICATION
TUTOR: FRANCES RUANE
"SUPERMAN:
CONTEMPORARY MYTH AND MESSIANISM"

With thanks to Frances Ruane for her dedication and professional candour.

I learned at an early age that the secret of peaceful cohabitation within a large family is to find a spot in the house or garden and declare it your inviolate territory. My own sanctum was a branch halfway up a Scotts pine in the back yard, and it was here that I spent the better part of my youth poring over books on classical mythology. I was fascinated by the idea of an age when gods walked upon the earth and consorted freely with man, and every aspect of human experience was attended to by an appropriate deity.

Only later did it occur to me that perhaps these immortals were never physically manifest. They may have been created to act as elaborate metaphors or explanations of social or environmental phenomena beyond the control or understanding of mere man; they may simply have been romantic tales shared among friends and disciples as a means of alleviating the hardships of an otherwise primitive and often cruel existence; they may even have been presented in an instructive manner, as role-models for mortals, a means of illustrating what we are capable of or should aspire to be.

Whatever the case, it is evident that every civilisation throughout history has had its own mythological identity. It is as if there is something inherent in the human condition that requires a divine presence; we preserve and nurture traditional legends, we worship them when they exist, and we create them when they do not.

At least such was the case prior to the turn of the century when our treatment of culture was to undergo a dramatic change. The industrial revolution and the subsequent 'age of technology' that followed infused western society with a rationale that allowed little room for romance or myth. Indeed the traditional need for a supernatural culture has all but been negated in the western hemisphere; what once presented mystery now science renders mundane, and as the volume of our self awareness grows and our control over our environment expands, so too the realm of the myth shrinks proportionally. Now skyscrapers replace titans, heaven retreats from the inquisitive probing of satellites, and an apocalyptic armageddon assumes chillingly realistic proportions in the form of global nuclear sterilisation.

None the less, we still retain a residual yearning for the mythic despite, or perhaps because of, the technocratic nature of our society; now, as never before every action of our lives is deliberate and predictable, as our personal identities are reduced to a series of digits in the form of

telephone, account and social security numbers. Thus our species, having overcome all natural threats, faces a new danger, that of the tedium and anonymity of meta-mediation.

We have responded in an innovative manner. We have created a contemporary mythos using the customary vocabulary of tradition; we have re-invented old legends and given them a modern veneer. In regenerating a hero-culture we present ourselves with archetypes that, while steeped in human values and moulded by human experience, attain a mythic status and inspire us to divinity.

This is an investigation of one such legend, a character who, despite his inauspicious beginnings, was to become a giant of 20th century mythos. Now, more than fifty years after he first made his appearance, he has achieved an iconographic status and a messianic appeal. Yet even this cult figure is again a retrospective product, relying heavily on established lore. A closer examination of his story tells us that his 'career' is little more than an analogy of The New Testament and that most of the major themes and elements in his story are derived from Judeo-Christian mythology.

This character, a curiously successful hybrid of modern technology and religious overtones, is, I believe, one of our ages attempts to create a messiah in the absence of a creed. He is not God made man; he is a man-made god - Superman .

Considering the scale and extent of the Superman myth in contemporary society it strikes me as extraordinary that no other treatise on contemporary mythology investigated Superman in terms of a divine analogy; allusions are constantly being made to his godlike nature but no indepth examination of his legend has ever been conducted. I believe this omission is significant considering the iconographic status that the character of Superman has achieved, especially in western (read Judeo-Christian) society. We can only speculate that Superman has never been considered worthy of acaedemic attention because of the 'trivial' nature of his origins (the pulp comic book) and because of the presumed young age of his audience. I would argue however that such 'trivial' popular myths are as informative about the nature of our society as the more dramatic 'real' events and personalities that have moulded it (1).

This thesis then is an examination of this legend, a legend that deserves our attention because it is a true idiosyncrasy of the 20th century. Research for this thesis was limited

because, as I have already noted, no other indepth body of information has been written on the subject. My conclusions then are drawn from peripheral sources (such as existing tracts on other mythologies, historical studies and relevant pchological texts) and pure observation, i.e. this work is entirely self-generated. It is a self contained body of work, not an extension of an already published study of Superman, of which there are none to the best of my knowledge; at least I did not find any in the course of my research, an unusual omission in any overview of modern mythos.

(1) As is generally the case, the 'domestic' or popular event is often more informative (esp. in an anthropological or sociological sense) then the more 'historically significant' event. For instance, we know more about the activities and structure of Roman society from the remains of Pompei then we do from records of the Punic wars or Ceasars conquest of Britain.



CHAPTER 1: THE STUFF THAT MYTH IS MADE OF

'From little acorns do mighty oak trees grow' and such is the case with Superman. Today Superman is an established icon of western culture. Thanks to skillful marketing, widespread merchandising and multi-media exposure his myth has gained a ubiquitous fame. The cry "Look up! Is it a bird, is it a plane?" heralding his dramatic entrance has become as familiar as his "S" crest, a motif that has now assumed emblematic significance. Who cannot claim to have even a passing knowledge of his story; how he came to earth as an infant, a refugee from an extinct world, and, upon realising his extraordinary potential here, assumed his legendary identity, donned his now famous outfit, and undertook his crusade against crime.

Such renown belies his humble origin. Superman began his career as an inconspicuous comic-strip in a depression ravaged United States. That he made an appearance at all was surprising. The original Superman scripts received a uniformly discouraging response from the conservative syndicated press and, after countless rejections the story found a home at 'Action Comics' only on condition that it undergo extensive revision and editing. These setbacks and stipulations were, in hindsight, understandable; the creator of Superman was a young amateur who had little professional experience within the comic field. The year was 1938 and Jerry Siegel had only recently graduated from High School.

Siegel had a passion for comics: for him pulp fiction was a means of escaping the suffocating sameness of a depression-gripped Ohio (later to become Superman's adopted birthplace). It was through his love of the medium that he met fellow enthusiast Joe Shuster, later to become his lifelong friend and partner. It is easy to imagine the two of them as boys, growing up and discovering the world together, swapping back issues and sharing intrigues; this association was later to develop into a creative collaboration, with Siegel providing scripts and Shuster illustrating them. A few of their early efforts were to see print and, encouraged by such success, they were determined to make a living from a labour of love. One concept in particular held the seventeen year old Siegel's imagination: that of a figure who (to quote Siegel) 'combined the qualities of Sampson and Hercules'. Even then it seems that he was prepared to admit the mythological precedent for the character; but I suspect that he was unaware of the phenomenon that he was

participating in. You see Superman was not simply the creation of a fertile imagination; he was the product of a fertile country. He was the product of a man and a nation coming of age.

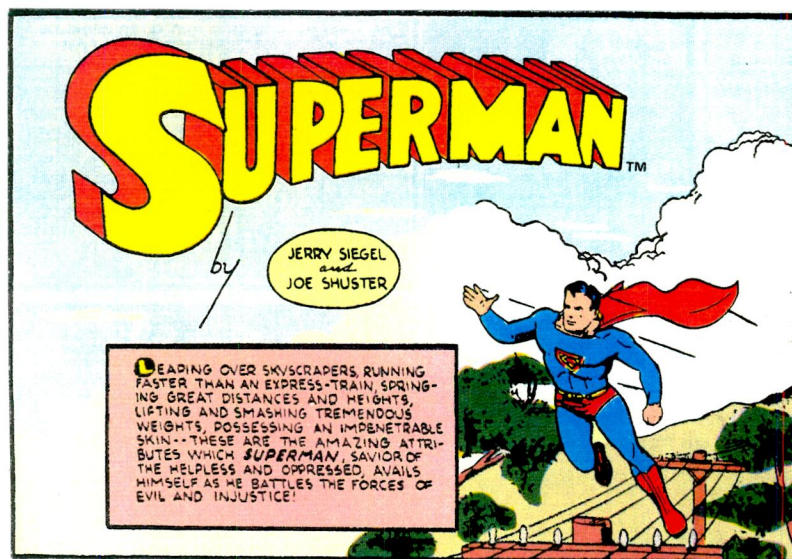
Superman owes as much to Franklin D. Roosevelt and the reformist 1930s as he does to his teenage creators. In many respects he embodied the spirit of the 'New Deal'; having overcome tremendous obstacles and an impoverished background he made the most of his own considerable resources and met the future with a hope and optimism that had been lacking in American society for some time. Admittedly, much of this hope and optimism was justifiably based on sound social and economic reforms. Under Roosevelt's presidency the country had its first social security programme (The Social Security Act of 1935) and nationwide training scheme (The Civilian Conservation Corps). It was also the first time that labour unions were officially condoned and encouraged by the government (The National Labour Relations Act of 1935). The 'thirties witnessed a dramatic mobilisation of the country's workforce and the initiation of ambitious recovery plans, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority. Such mobilisation requires a figurehead and while F.D.R., himself a brilliant statesman and political innovator, was a suitable candidate for the job, the scale of events required a larger than life character to lead the campaign. The country turned to a figure that reached into America's very psyche: Superman. He became an emblem of the age, a status reflected in the huge audience commanded by both his printed stories and radio show.

At this point it is important to remember that a large portion of the audience he attracted at that time was adult, and much of this contingent was comprised of immigrants ('The Superman Sourcebook', Roger Stern, DC Publishing, 1992). The United States, despite its own internal political and economic problems, acted as a magnet for migrants who hoped for a better life in 'The New Country'. Perhaps they felt a distinct sympathy for Superman who, like themselves, was an exile in a strange land but had become an integral and important member of his surrogate homeland. Perhaps they, even more than the native population, realised just what an integral part of the American dream the character was. But I suspect that many immigrants gravitated towards the story because of the simplicity with which it was presented; the pictorial nature of the comics and basic dialogue of early radio shows circumvented many of the language and

illiteracy problems widespread in the foreign population.

The significance of this immigrant input is threefold: they partook of the story with a level of mature enthusiasm that ensured the continued success of the legend and eventually saw it translated into more 'adult' media; they brought with them their own indigenous mythology, elements of which were later added to the Superman saga, thereby making him a more rounded generic hero; and they contributed new knowledge and expertise to American society as a whole (Albert Einstein's work on the Manhattan Project, for example). This last point is important because in doing so they created a technologically advanced culture and a climate in which anything seemed possible.

Many of Superman's powers paid tribute to these technological advances, ironically by exceeding them. This was the time when commercial aviation became a realistic proposition; so if any ordinary American citizen could take to the air then it only seemed natural that a divine being could do so at will. In an era when transport was becoming faster and more sophisticated, only Superman was 'faster than a speeding locomotive'. When the telephone had established itself as the intrinsic communicative tool of a large nation, the man of steel was unhindered by such a cumbersome apparatus - rather, he had ultra-sensitive hearing.



Yet even though he was naturally possessed of every wonder of the age, from x-ray vision to titanium-tough skin, it was to the development of the media that he owed most of his success. The 'thirties saw a dramatic expansion in communication industries. The growth was encouraged by the Roosevelt administration who welcomed any means of

reinforcing the public's confidence in its policies. Nowhere was this more evident than in print media. The initial impetus for the Superman saga was provided by pulp comics. Comics were prolific; they were easy to produce ('fanzines' or amateur productions constituted the bulk of the market) and had not yet come under the jurisdiction of syndicates (which were later to stifle freelance efforts by controlling the monopoly of sales). Moreover, they were a cheap form of escapism when television and video arcades were non-existent. Unpromising beginnings perhaps, but within two years of his debut Superman had graduated to radio. The importance of radio as a communications tool had been effectively established by Roosevelt's fireside chats. Now the figurehead of the New Deal (Superman) vied with its creator (the president) for attention on the airwaves. During the golden age of radio, the words "Look up! Is it a bird?; is it a plane? It's Superman!" introduced the highest rated show of its time, eagerly awaited by young and old alike.

This was only the beginning. As more sophisticated means of communication evolved, the legend was translated successfully from page to stage to screen, each depiction presenting an accurate interpretation of contemporary society. We will deal with this progression and the role of the figure as a social commentator in a later chapter, but at this point we should examine the elements that make up this man made god and the significance of each of his characteristics.

CHAPTER 2: SUPERMAN, THE POWER PACKAGE

"Faster than a speeding bullet; more powerful than a locomotive; able to leap tall buildings in a single bound." We are all familiar with Superman's powers. They are an unusual mix of dynamic excess, sensory hypersensitivity and the miraculous. They pay homage to religious and classical myth, twentieth century achievement, but above all to sheer physical potency.

It seems it is a prime requisite for every superhero to be endowed with some muscular prowess or enhanced stamina. But the question is, why is physical ability valued above skill, intellectual sophistication or emotional discipline? For the answer to this we have to look at the roots of Superman, or more specifically at his creators, Shuster and Siegel.

We must never forget that Superman was the first in the genre and rapidly became a phenomenal success in his own right. As such he set the standards and established the criteria for subsequent competitors and imitators. If Superman had the strength to move mountains then thereafter practically all superheroes would have to have a comparative strength to be even considered in the same league. But of all the powers he could have been granted, why then did his creators chose pure physical ability?

Well the second vital point we must bear in mind with reference to this issue is as follows: Shuster and Siegel were only seventeen when they conceived of Superman. As such they were still crossing that tentative bridge in adolescence between boyhood and maturity, and were still coming to terms with their own physicality. In hindsight, the man of steel could only have been the creation of a teenager, embodying as he does the optimism and confidence of youth and the capacity to move freely in society as an adult. Adolescence realises both of these advantages but the emphasis is placed firmly on the physical. Superman then, as a product, was a mixture of a residual boyhood imagination and rationale, a means of accepting a dramatic period in their lives in terms they were familiar with. We can easily imagine them discussing the project while flicking through back issues of "Tarzan" comics (which were very popular at the time and may have acted as a source of inspiration) while horse-playing or mock wrestling.

Strength then is the simplest and most tangible value for a young adolescent male to employ in articulating his control over his environment. As an extension of this we can interpret Superman as an expression of this control, but taken to such

an extreme that he becomes a form of young male wish fulfilment.

There is a further, less conspicuous connection between adolescent consciousness and Superman which pertains to the issue of strength. Adolescents, in dealing with an adult world where the choices offered become increasingly more complex, tend to view issues in a very polarised manner; there is a tendency to revert back to a streamlined, almost innocent means of evaluating a situation. It isn't a very sophisticated process because generally the problems facing a teenager are either internalised or are relatively easy to solve. Similarly the crises that arise in the Shuster/Siegel universe of Superman, while apparently large in magnitude, are usually simplistic in nature. Superman, for instance, never has a headache, never gets stuck in traffic and never has to fill out income tax forms, nor has he any children to worry about. When problems do arise in Superman's world they can usually be attributed to a single malefactor. The problem is then summarily solved with a few swift right uppercuts. Again we note that in this universe, a world created by two adolescent minds, a show of force is the quickest and most satisfactory means of dealing with a dilemma.

It was hardly surprising, however, that Shuster and Siegel were given to believe this. Both came from relatively orthodox religious backgrounds and attended bible classes as children. Here they were regaled with stories of heroes who killed giants with slingshots or slew scores of men with an asses jawbone, often aided by a violent god. Hardly surprising then that they assumed that brute force was an acceptable means to achieve success provided god was on their side. Traditionally strength equates with power and even contemporary conditioning does little to discourage this notion. We are reminded of Nietzsche's theory of the 'superman'. He believed that all human behaviour is motivated by the 'will to power' or that it is inherently natural for man to be competitive, physically overcoming their opponents when necessary. Nietzsche himself criticised Judeo-Christian values, saying they equated humility and passivity with virtue. Instead he refers to an earlier era when society was ruled by a warrior caste and when physical domination, strength and nobility were perceived and defined as 'good' (albeit by the warriors themselves). At this point however we should point out the most striking difference between Nietzsche's superman and Shuster's and Siegel's. While the two share the 'will to power',

Nietzsche sees his as being the passionate man who learns to overcome his passions and use them in a creative manner; the 'teenage' Superman is either devoid of passion or he allows it to possess him entirely in moments of anger or grief.



Yet in one respect Superman has learned to use his passions or powers in a creative manner in that he has learned to fly. In doing so he has also transgressed the parameters set by physical experience, adolescent or otherwise, and entered a sublime level of ability verging on divinity. Flight is his second most obvious talent but what we are concerned with is not how he flies but why he flies at all.

Man has always dreamed of flying. It is the one means of mobility not naturally available to him, and that which is elusive is fascinating. In bygone days he created agents that acted as his envoy in the sky. Later he sought means to propel himself artificially into the air, e.g. Leonardo Da Vinci's attempts at designing a helicopter. It wasn't until relatively recently that man finally conquered the skies and it wasn't until then that he realised the significance of the conquest.

As already stated, in the America of the '30s commercial aviation was proving its worth and it only appeared to be a matter of time before civilian air transport became commonplace. Given this it seemed only natural that a Superman should have a natural ability to defy gravity, thereby once and for all declaring man's superiority over nature and natural law. It is noteworthy though that initially he did not possess this now standard ability. Rather, he could jump enormous distances. With the arrival of World War II, during which air supremacy proved to be the deciding factor

in winning the war, man finally declared his dominance in the air and subsequently Superman's flying leaps became true flight.

The man in flight, however, is not necessarily an arrogant display of superiority. It can also be interpreted as a positive attribute, an expression of hope or optimism. There is a direct link in human perception between any rise in height or altitude and feeling of health or goodwill. Phrases such as "things are looking up", "his heart soared", and "high hopes" tell us this much.

Similarly the power of flight can be interpreted as a metaphor for liberty. The world is divided into nations, each laying claim to a specific piece of terrain, each piece of terrain having an accompanying area of territorial water where appropriate. But the sky is owned by no-one, so he who flies through it is flying in free territory and thus is free himself. Not only that but he who can fly without the aid of artificial stimulus or assistance is presumed to be free of the laws of nature, the most basic of all binding or prohibitive forces.

This freedom from human restraints connotes some form of divine ability. It is almost as though by endowing him with this capacity to fly we are recognising his godlike presence, or rather his divinity is assumed and flight is simply a manifestation of this. Such is evident in a telling scene in the second movie of the Superman series. General Zod (a malefactor from the man of steel's home planet Krypton who is possessed of comparable powers to Superman) glances at a mosaic in The White House floor; it depicts the American emblem, the bald eagle, and he remarks, "I see that you are in the practice of worshipping things that fly." It is as much an arrogant dismissal as a valid observation.

Having already examined his ability to fly and his strength we must now turn our attention to a set of miscellaneous powers that can be grouped under the heading 'heightened sensory sensitivity', in other words, the ability to hear a dog whistle, the possession of telescopic sight, etc. The significance of these abilities is that, by implication I must stress, he is more intelligent than normal human beings. The argument goes as follows: if he can receive more sensory information from the environment then we must assume that he has the extra mental facilities for dealing with it; it then follows that he has

a more advanced brain and thus by implication he is more intelligent than us. It could only be by implication though; at no point in his career, either as a comic strip, a radio show, a television series or a movie, does his genius manifest itself in his thoughts or actions.

There is another implication that goes with his super-senses, especially in conjunction with his strength (strength here being synonymous with virility): that there is a suggestion here of super-sexual prowess. The suggestion is obviously low key due to the tender age of his greater audience. Even his one longstanding love interest with Lois Lane is complicated by the constant irony of being in competition with his alter-ego (Clark Kent) for her affections.

A further complication is the apparent contradiction between this supposed sexual confidence and the subliminal message that his suit is transmitting; the outfit may act as an excellent showcase for his rippling physique but its design would indicate conventional human sexual insecurities. At first glance the garb seems bold and theatrical, the bright primaries blue, yellow and red bespeaking of an extrovert, or in this context a sexually assertive male. Yet the costume can be read diagrammatically, the colour bands corresponding with sexual taboo zones, the red areas being the points of most restricted access, the blue representing the 'neutral zones'. If we accept this as true then the cloak can be interpreted as a device that can be wrapped around the whole body to act as a total exclusion zone. After all, cloaks are usually intended to be protective garments and are rarely used as purely decorative motifs. This idea would also tie in with the issue of Superman's dual identity. A dual identity in the psychological sense is a means of enabling an individual to transgress inhibitions and satisfy repressed needs by creating an active alter ego, while maintaining the security of the original passive persona. I often wonder who we are realistically asked to be more sympathetic with, Clark Kent or Superman, and I suspect the answer is the former; we may identify with Superman and all of his improbabilities but only by accepting Clark Kent, the common man, as the mediator of our escapism.

At this point I would like to draw your attention to an interesting contradiction inherent in the character of Superman. The above hypothesis, coupled with what we already know about the Superman character, leaves us with a

somewhat disturbing picture: an alien fraught with possible psychological complications and implied sexual hang-ups with powers which hold the potential for tremendous violence. Not necessarily so, in fact I would argue that the above scenario is more representative of the subconscious state of his teenage creators than of the Superman himself. I hasten to add that this does not mean that Siegel and Shuster were sexual deviants or suffered from personality defects. Rather, Superman represents the outward manifestation of a normal adolescent mental state, including, naturally, a certain amount of sexual tension. Superman's 'colour-coded suit', for example, is indicative of a libidinal defensiveness on Shuster and Siegel's part. Ostensibly, 'the man of steel' comes across as as a well balanced individual, calm, collected and in control. He smiles regularly, has an endearing cows-lick and is one of the few superheroes to have the honesty to reveal his face to public scrutiny rather than hide it behind a mask. He may be a self-appointed judge but one always gets the impression that his decisions are based in an almost innocent belief in pure truth, absolute justice, and yes, the ideal American way.

Thus he has a creed. He also has miraculous powers to enforce it, and a faithful following; in essence everything that constitutes a god. I have previously made reference to the divine implications of the Superman myth and the messianic theme prevalent in the story. In any investigation of his appeal, an understanding of his role as an artificial deity is pivotal. We will now examine the manner in which he is presented as an analogous messiah.



CHAPTER 3: THE ANALAGOUS MESSIAH

That Superman has become an icon is undisputed. That his story has reached a status bordering on the mythic is probably also true, but it is the nature of this myth that intrigues me most. Part of his appeal can be attributed to the 'Superman Formula', i.e. the successful eclectic synthesis of elements taken from historical legends married with modern consumerism. Yet the scale of his influence transcends the parameters of contemporary folklore and takes on almost divine dimensions. Popular appreciation has done nothing to discourage this; indeed participants in the story (audience and creators alike) have endorsed his deistic aspect and moulded him, whether consciously or unconsciously, into a latter day saviour. In this chapter we will examine how, to achieve his messianic state, his story borrows heavily from the most influential mythos in western society, the Judeo-Christian tradition. I hope to illustrate that his character is based on the archetypal messiah, Christ, and that his story can be interpreted as an analogy of the new testament.

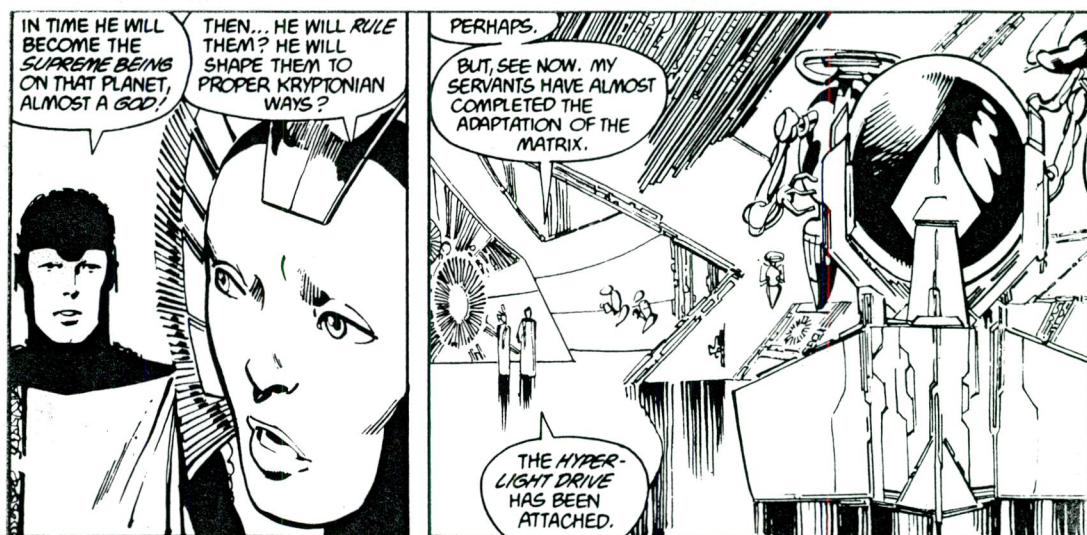
In a previous section we examined the society that gave birth to Superman, the United States of the 1930s. Comparitively, it was not unlike the Judaea of 2,000 years ago: both maintained a reasonably stable political order with a hierarchical government and devolved local rule under the auspices of governors. Both provided essential amenities such as a sanitation system and law enforcement: both enjoyed international trade and the melange of cultures that this resulted in; but most importantly, both Judaea and American were experiencing a period of social upheaval, the former due to foreign occupation by the Roman Empire, the latter caused by economic uncertainty. All of the above factors seem to suggest that a sophisticated civilisation under threat of social disorder provides the ideal conditions for the 'messianic impulse', i.e. the popular need for a leader, preferably a divine agent, to aid the community overcome apparently insurmountable obstacles.

In fact the only real physical difference between the two societies is that Judaea lacked the technology to produce the 'myriad media' prevalent today(2). None the less it is a

(2) Obviously this statement is an over-simplification but in context the observation is still valid. In the absence of technologically sophisticated media, popular communication in Judea was dependant on an oral tradition. The first gospel, for instance, was written forty years after the death of Christ; Superman, comparitively, made the transition from pulp to radio in the space of three years.

profound difference because without it Jerry Siegel would not have had the resources of the multiparous mass media that we are surrounded with today. When Siegel and Shuster planted their idea in the fertile ground of an attentative nation it grew beyond all expectations. Aided by the media, the credo of their creation immediately spread to a much larger audience than did the gospel of the original messiah. In retrospect it seems that such success was anticipated. From the beginning Superman was cast in an epic light, and even his fictitious origin had biblical connotations.

In much the same way that the bible informs us of the genealogy of Christ, so too the official Superman sourcebook provides us with a list of the man of steel's ancestors. Coincidentally, they share the same number of preceding generations and the manner in which Superman's ancestral lineage is presented, e.g. "Kal-El begot Jor-El..." etc., is suspiciously biblical.



We are told that he came from a planet far removed from Earth: his home world of Krypton was on the verge of self destruction when he was placed in escape rocket by his father (Jor-El) and blasted towards our solar system, thereby evading death. Upon arriving on Earth he discovers that conditions here (such as a lower gravity and a different light spectrum from his homeworld) favour his his more advanced physiology and denser molecular structure, thereby making him the possessor of great powers here.

Now whether it was intentional or not is open to speculation but already obvious parallels can be drawn between the New



Testament of Christ and the story of Superman. Superman was conceived on a fabulous planet in the heavens and was a member of an advanced and superior civilisation. This immediately implies that his origin was superior, and in this context divine. Similarly his escape in the 'cradle-rocket' that prevented his untimely death is remarkably like the flight of the infant messiah into Egypt, an event that was prompted by the order of execution which threatened the infant Christ's life. Likewise the humble upbringings of both Christ and Clark Kent (the normal persona adopted by Superman as the other half of his dual identity) parallel each other. Kent was raised by a childless farming couple in a rural backwater, and Christ, also believed to be an only child, was brought up by a carpenter and his wife in Nazareth, the equivalent of smalltown middle America.

Rarely during childhood did either of the two exhibit any exceptional ability, although the young Jesus amazed the scribes in the temple with his wisdom when discussing theological questions, and a juvenile Master Kent displayed great prowess as his highschool's star football player. But upon reaching maturity the extent of their powers became apparent and both bade farewell to their mothers, each in their own way; "I must be about my fathers business" (Christ) and "Goodbye Mom" (Superman).

I suspect that these messianic parallels were unintentional. At least this is true of the early versions of Superman that were prevalent in the '40s and '50s. Perhaps any more overt reference to the messianic aspect of the character would have been considered potentially offensive or controversial; at the time, comics were under intense scrutiny from moral watchdogs and had to conform to very strict ethical criteria. Yet by the '60s contributors to the mythos has realised the potential of this theme and began to exploit it as the story was translated into different media.

A cursory look at the 1978 Superman movie will illustrate this point. The promotional material that accompanied the film made the matter virtually specific in the blurb "...with Marlon Brando as Jor-El who gave his only son to save the world...". Intended or not (and the allusion would not have to be conscious although it is safe to assume it is) only the word 'begotten' seems to be missing from the sentence to make the historical precedent of the story clear. We should note also that there is emphasis placed on Jor-El as the father. Indeed during the film he is portrayed as the 'archetypal father', presented as he is as a high ranking member of the council that rules

Krypton(3). The implication here is that he is 'God the Father', an idea that is reinforced throughout the film when he appears to Superman in visionary form at moments of crisis. If we pursue this argument we can suggest that there exists an emotional, or by extension a spiritual, triangle between Jor-El (the father), Superman (the divine force) and Clark Kent (the man); in effect a blessed trinity.

If this point seems tentative then the sequel to the movie provides us with further evidence to support the claim. In 'Superman II' the man of steel is juxtaposed with a trio of equally powerful adversaries. Collectively they can be interpreted as the 'diabolical trinity' (the theological antithesis of the Holy Trinity; you may be more familiar with their numeric representation, the number of the beast '666'). Their leader is called General Zod, an obvious perversion of the divine title. Indeed at one point in the film when a bystander exclaims "Oh God!" he rebukes them by declaring "No, Zod!"

I have stressed that the allusion need not be conscious but an indepth examination of the images and conceits employed in the movie will make it clear that the similarities are too strong to be merely coincidental.

For instance, before realising their full powers both Christ and Superman spend a period in isolation. Christ spends forty days in the desert. Superman spends an unspecified but considerable time in the icy desert of the Arctic, in a crystalline structure that is later to become known as the fortress of solitude. During his stay in the desert Christ is confronted by the devil (his deviant alter-ego) who attempts to corrupt him; Christ overcomes temptation through philosophical reason and simple faith. The cinematic equivalent takes place in the third installment of the Superman movies. At one point in the movie Superman becomes corrupted and as a reaction splits into two distinct entities, the omnipotent but evil Superman and the good but all too human Clark Kent. A battle between the two ensues. Clark Kent overcomes his opponent by throttling the life out of him. He thereby regains his powers and gazes towards heaven with a beatific expression. We can also interpret this scene as one of the few occasions when Superman comes close to a true resurrection. In overcoming his 'evil half'

(3) Traditionally Jor-El is presented as a high ranking, but not a supreme, member of the Kryptonian government. Relative to a human being, however, he would appear to be supreme; moreover, in his capacity as the leading judiciary on the planet he can rightly be compared to the biblical 'God The Father' figure.

he has redeemed himself and in doing so has returned from the dead and gained a kind of immortality. But it is not a true resurrection in the gospel sense so there the divinity ends.

Obviously both have miraculous powers but the feats they perform often have a common denominator: Christ resurrects Lazarus from the dead and Superman reanimates his dead girlfriend Lois Lane by reversing the flow of time: Christ calms the storm on the lake and Superman averts disaster by controlling the flow of a lake that has burst through a hydroelectric dam: Christ ascends into heaven and Superman soars into the stratosphere.

We must, however, put this Judeo-Christian analogy in perspective. The above incident highlights the difference between a true messiah and a twentieth century interpretation. Whereas Christ would use his vision to search the soul of a disciple, Superman would use his to weld a steel plate onto the side of a ship or penetrate a concrete bunker. Simply put, Superman is a crude messiah, an elementary one if you will. Whereas Christ came into the world to enlighten men, Superman was created to entertain, the product of a young man's whim that was to swell into a vast commercial enterprise. Unlike his more developed analogues in all the world's great religions, Superman does not offer love or goodwill, self knowledge or contemplation as the keys to man's salvation. He can only offer his own physical powers. Ultimately his message for man rests in his own superior strength and lies in his ability to be an enforcer of what he judges to be good or bad. His creed sums up his philosophy succinctly; "champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who has sworn to devote his existence to fight for those in need and for truth, justice and the American way".

It is sadly ironic then that the final twist of his career (his demise) was unjust, flagrantly dishonest, but was in perfect keeping with the modern American way.



CHAPTER 4: THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION

The death of Superman occurred in the final weeks of 1992 amid much media hype; the process of his demise, however, had started much earlier.

After the halcyon days of the forties and fifties interest in the Superman story had gradually waned. There were the occasional revivals, such as the attention the movie series aroused, but the decline was irreversible. The result was a loss in revenue for the commercial interests associated with the story, an unforgivable sin for any comic book character to commit. Drastic measures were required, and a team of marketing experts and creative directors were assembled at the head office of DC Comics in New York. Here his fate was decided; he would die of excessive violence following a suitably cataclysmic punch-up with a titanic foe.

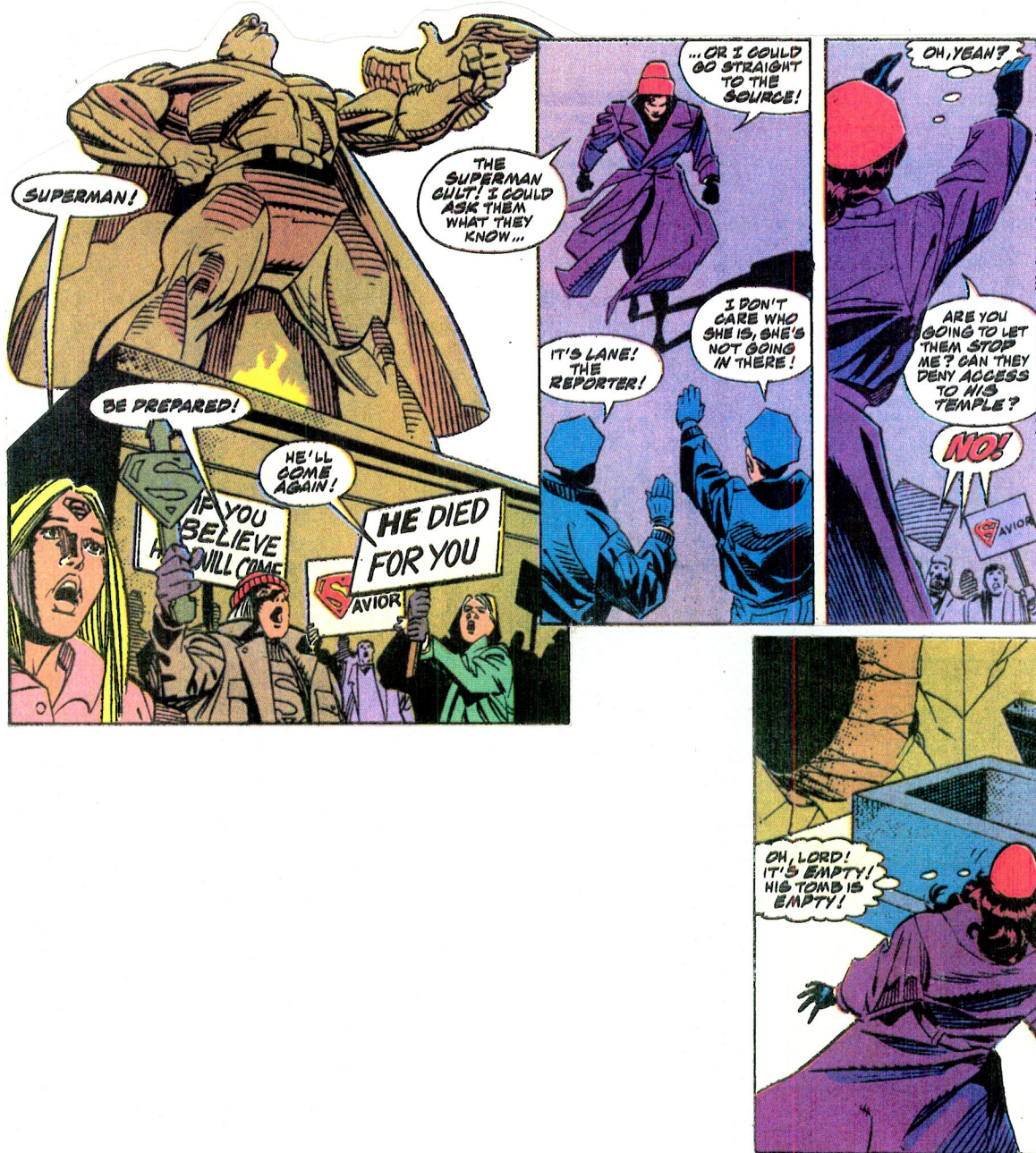
In keeping with the messianic theme of the legend, the end came in the form of 'Doomsday' (originally the name Armageddon had been selected but it had already been copyrighted). The character, a creature whose entire motivation appears to have been to destroy everything in its path, was a neat and practical marketing invention; as it sluiced its way through an army of superheroes it rampaged from comic to comic (the story ran through no less than six of the DC Comic titles), ostensibly to convey the epic proportions of the battle but essentially to encourage readers of a particular publication to buy the others involved. In exposing the reader to more of its productions, DC hoped to encourage new brand loyalty and increase sales. The ploy worked; sales rose from 300,000 a week to over 4,000,000. Secondly, Doomsday was used to dramatically remove the deadwood from the 'DC universe', i.e. to kill off characters that had lost their popular appeal. Finally, in the climax of the drama, it destroyed Superman. In doing so it ended an era. Not only was the man of steel dead, but the age of pulp innocence he represented died with him, as business men deemed the champion of comic benevolence too naive to coexist with 'terminators' and 'predators.'

It was not a glorious end; the greatest criticism of the story (of which there was plenty) referred the casual and undignified manner in which one of the best known of American icons was arbitrarily dispatched. In a relatively new country which is always conscious of its lack of indigenous tradition, the cynical negation of a recognised part of Americana seems reckless; but the myth had passed its consumer shelf-life.

It is perhaps the greatest irony that, in much the same way that 2,000 years ago the crowd shouted 'Barabus', thus sending

Christ to his death, so too was the contemporary messiah condemned by the vox populi - this time for the lack of an appreciative audience. But already DC officials are hinting at a possible 'resurrection' at a later date, and given the marketing coup his death caused, it seems inevitable that he will return⁽⁴⁾. It was Christ's triumph over death that established him as a divine entity and resulted in the development of Christianity as a religion. Perhaps if and when Superman returns from the dead, his myth will undergo a similar revival and experience a comparable growth. Still others would argue that such a ritual re-introduction is unnecessary, that a figure, especially a fictitious figure, so deeply ingrained in the popular mythos of a society cannot be reanimated because he cannot be negated in the first place. Whatever the case, Superman will still bear mute witness to the events of the culture that created and sustained him for so long, as he has done for more than half a century. In the final part of this thesis we will examine how 'the man of tomorrow' has acted as a social document for his day, how his adventures reflected the social trends and attitudes of his times.

(4) Not only are DC still running the Superman story in five different titles despite his death, but they are also introducing new super-characters that bear a suspicious resemblance to 'the man of steel' under the auspices of subsidiary publications. In this manner DC can gauge audience reaction to new interpretations of the Superman story without dramatically interfering with the original storyline.



Above: Superman's return seems inevitable, and his divine status will be ensured.

Right: Already Superman impersonators are vying for a place on the shelf.







CHAPTER 4: THE MAN OF STEEL AS A SOCIAL DOCUMENT

More than simply an advocate of the American way, for more than half a century Superman has personified the American Dream. He has acted as a mirror for a nation, his fluctuating popularity a reflection of social tastes and his storylines documenting cultural events. We should at this point take at least a cursory look at how Superman has responded to the changes in American society over the past fifty years.

Even today his story requires complete suspension of disbelief, so it is easy to imagine what an improbable figure he seemed to the depression weary population of a conservative 1930s United States, the America of "relief, recovery, and reform." Yet that nation unanimously accepted Superman, perhaps because of the unmitigated confidence his character expressed. He was the first social phenomenon to suggest America's potential, as evident in his pseudonym "the man of tomorrow. He represented the bold face to the future, the simple faith in success given enough determination. He was an emblem of hope on a homefront that was often uncertain, in a world where international affairs were about to take a dramatic turn. Just two years after he first appeared World War II began in 1939.

If anything the war enhanced his popularity. He was, like every other comic-book character of the time, employed as a crude propaganda tool, but unlike many of his fictional contemporaries (such as 'Major Victory' and 'Captain America') he rarely openly engaged the enemy. Shuster and Siegel, who were still responsible for the story at the time, felt it inappropriate to engage in overt political rhetoric, although editorial pressures occasionally dictated otherwise. This was to Superman's longterm advantage because most of the comic-strip heroes who made the defeat of the axis powers their *raison d'être* found themselves redundant by the late 1940s. Nonetheless, Superman did his patriotic bit (see illustration over), occasionally battling thinly disguised Nazi plots in his weekly magazine or urging listeners to support the war effort on his hugely successful radio show of the time (see fig. over).

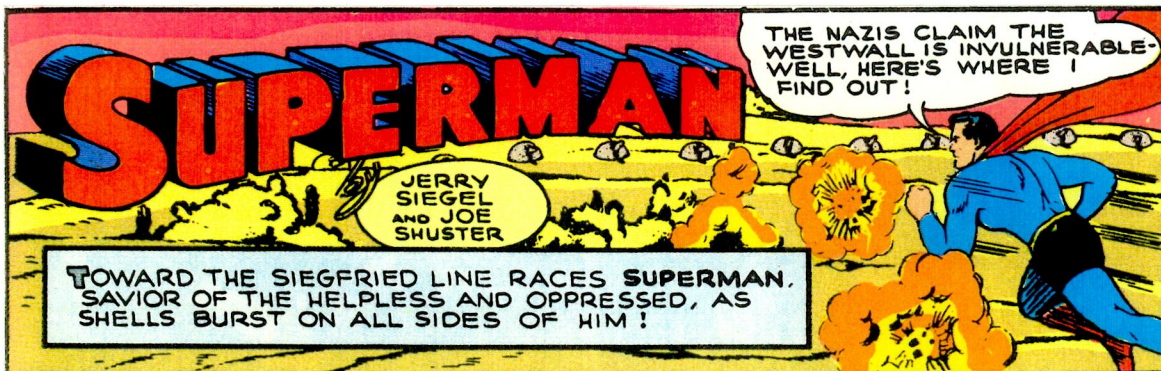
It is interesting to note that Superman was one of the first works of fiction to be adapted for the radio, one of the first new popular mediums of the period; it was the start of a tradition that was to see the myth translated into all of the most influential channels of communication of our century. I consider it a measure of the power of this legend that Superman's presence is so media pervasive, and that the authorities (editors, directors, producers, etc.) of each communicative form have

SUPERMAN

THE NAZIS CLAIM THE WESTWALL IS INVULNERABLE- WELL, HERE'S WHERE I FIND OUT!

JERRY SIEGEL AND JOE SHUSTER

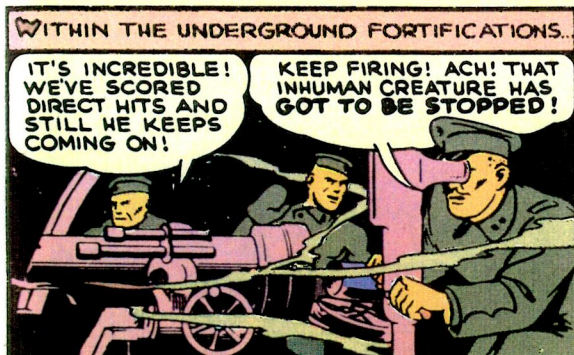
TOWARD THE SIEGFRIED LINE RACES SUPERMAN. SAVIOR OF THE HELPLESS AND OPPRESSED, AS SHELLS BURST ON ALL SIDES OF HIM!



WITHIN THE UNDERGROUND FORTIFICATIONS...

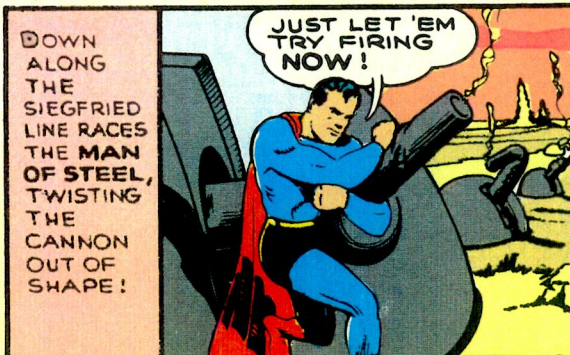
IT'S INCREDIBLE! WE'VE SCORED DIRECT HITS AND STILL HE KEEPS COMING ON!

KEEP FIRING! ACH! THAT INHUMAN CREATURE HAS GOT TO BE STOPPED!



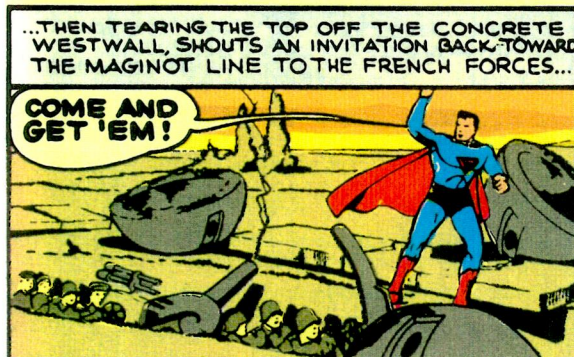
DOWN ALONG THE SIEGFRIED LINE RACES THE MAN OF STEEL, TWISTING THE CANNON OUT OF SHAPE!

JUST LET 'EM TRY FIRING NOW!



...THEN TEARING THE TOP OFF THE CONCRETE WESTWALL, SHOUTS AN INVITATION BACK-TOWARD THE MAGINOT LINE TO THE FRENCH FORCES...

COME AND GET 'EM!



A TERRIFIC LEAP CARRIES SUPERMAN FAR INTO GERMANY... BUT AS HE HURTTLES THRU THE AIR, A FIGHTING PLANE SWOOPS TOWARD HIM GUNS BLAZING...

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE, EH?



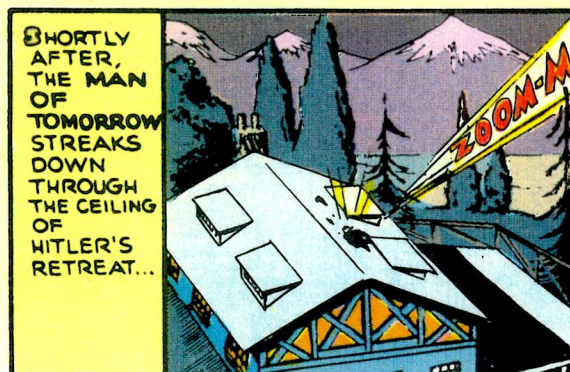
WELL, HERE IT IS!

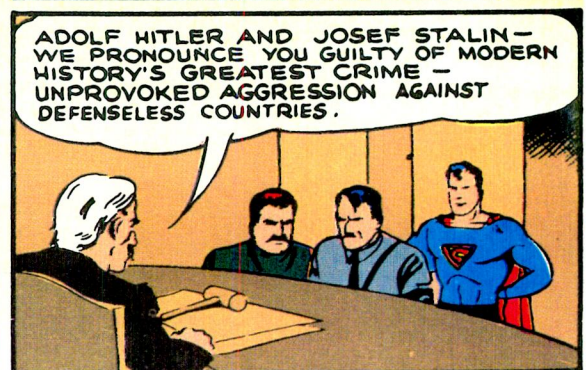
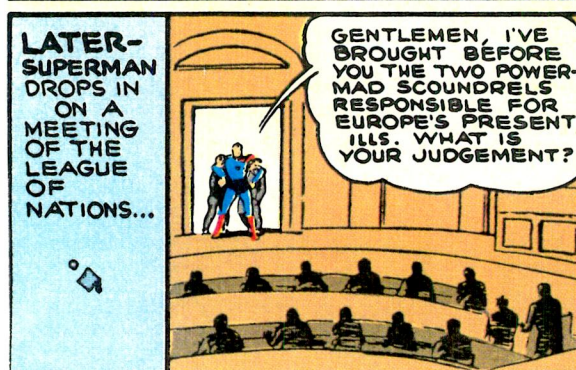
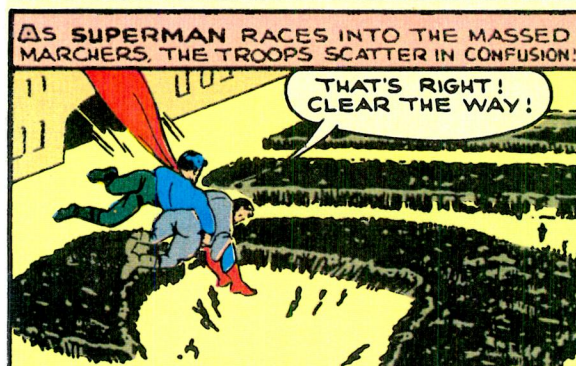
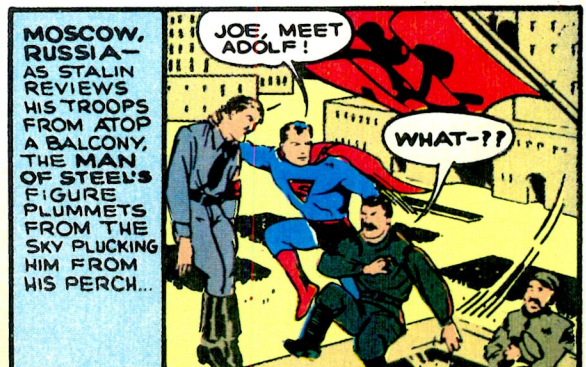
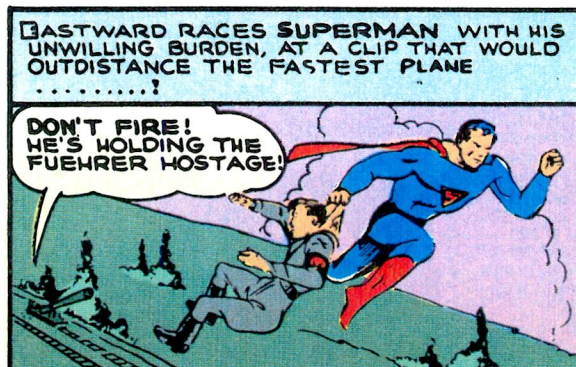
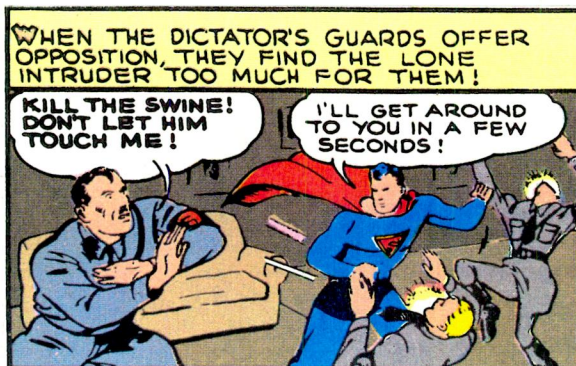
HIMMELIVOS IS DISS?

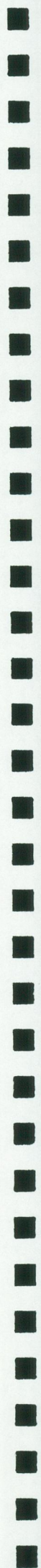


SHORTLY AFTER, THE MAN OF TOMORROW STREAKS DOWN THROUGH THE CEILING OF HITLER'S RETREAT...

ZOOM-M







actively sustained his story by reinterpreting and re-presenting it.

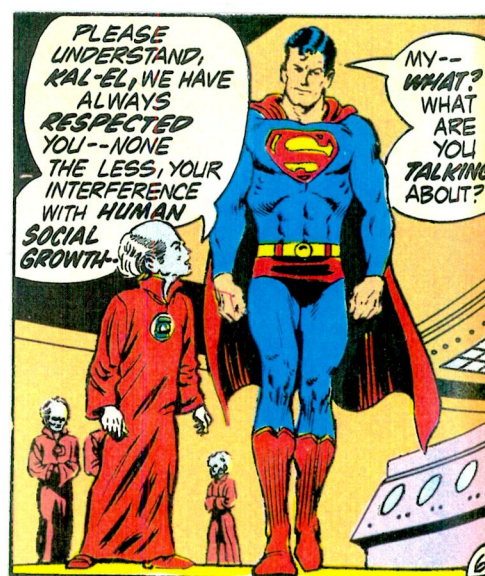
Such is evident in the 50s by which time his radio show had become a television series starring George Reeves. Indeed at this stage the myth had become meta-myth, in that it had the capacity in itself to reproduce peripheral legends. For instance, on the night that George Reeves died, a night watchman on the set of the T.V. show reported seeing his phantom appear, looking melancholic and dressed as Superman, before slowing fading into the shadows.

By now the man of steel still had a propaganda potential. The political threat to the United States was still an external one but the nature of the enemy had changed; Communists were now the enemy. But this was the era of the Cold War and again Superman did not ostensibly attack the political adversary of the day. The implication was always present though; green kryptonite (an element from his own planet and the only known substance that could harm him) suddenly changed colour to red.

The popularity of Superman by the early 60s was matched only by his meteoric fall from grace. When John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, a boy in the stunned crowd expressed the problem poignantly when he asked "where was Superman?" It was a rude awakening for a population who very quickly had to come to terms with the problem of reconciling the ideal and the reality. A nation realised that fiction could not replace fact and that powerful superlatives were no substitute for political stability.

Inevitably, many of the illusions held by western society were failing in the face of hard fact. When Yuri Gagarin returned from his historic space flight, he released a carefully prepared statement for the benefit of western listeners to the effect that "I have been up there and there is no heaven." Now obviously we have been aware for some time that paradise doesn't reside just beyond the reach of gravity; but the above illustrates that once the remotest possibility of a divine presence is destroyed, then even the greatest faith cannot contradict the truth.

The 1960s saw a turning point in Superman's career. Social unrest in the United States meant that now the threat to the nation had become

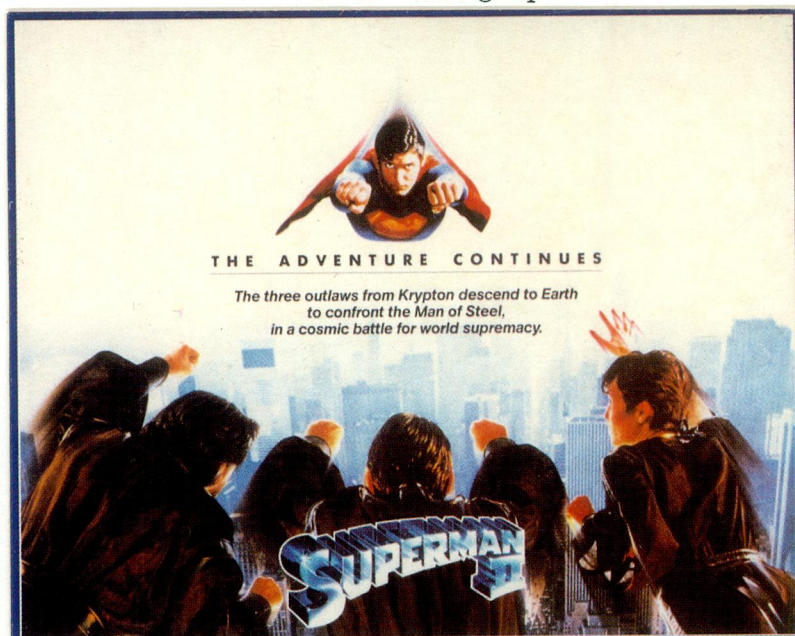


Public disinterest was undermining Superman's confidence by the mid 60s

internalised. While he had been born in a period of civil unrest, at least there was a national consensus; now America was dividing into social strata, each representing mutually hostile political opinion. 'The man of steel's' stoic political overtures gradually palled in the face of a politically critical generation. Where once he had encouraged kids to brush their teeth he now warned them of the dangers of substance abuse. Later still, the Watergate scandal dealt a devastating blow to the American ideal and Superman responded by abstaining from political campaigning, opting instead to entertain a dispirited public; by the early 70s he had reverted to dealing out justice to common criminals, alien invaders, and mad scientists.

The myth was to experience a renaissance during the late seventies with the first release of the Superman movies. The revival was hardly surprising; the government had re-established a degree of public confidence and the popular culture was comprised of an uncomfortable mixture of entrenched conservatism and residual 60s excess. The movie then came as a response to consumer demand for the spectacular (bearing in mind that the moon landing had been accomplished in 1969) and as a much needed iconographic endorsement for the then administration. The film reminds us that by now the myth had achieved a level of 'adult' recognition, as evident in the vast budget the producers were prepared to expend to realise the story in a more mature medium.

But the films also denoted the limit of the illusion; having presented the movie audience with a 'real' personification of Supermen, no more could be done to convince a prospective audience that the character could transcend the parameters of fiction and be made flesh. Thereafter the legend began to pale. The only other overt political statement concerning Superman came in the 80s, and even then it was a negative one. In the Batman graphic novel "The Dark Knight Returns" Superman is cast as the antagonist and is used as a metaphor for the worst of Reganite America: an aggressive,



domineering megalomaniac whose blind following of an anachronistic creed urges him to destroy anything that is deemed politically unacceptable.

It was practically the end of the road for the man of steel. Even his comic sales, the mainspring of his support, began to decline. We are already familiar with the events that lead to his demise; in a sense this chapter has acted as a eulogy for the legend. The simple naievity (and thus power) of his myth was destroyed by commercial exploitation, and even if he were to be 'resurrected' now, he would be devoid of his greatest quality; his innocence.

CONCLUSION

If for no other reason, Superman is noteworthy for having such a longstanding career in a throwaway society; his duration is testament to his universal popularity. Yet it is easy to understand the appeal of the myth. He was a figure with godlike potential who could have proclaimed his own divinity, yet chose to use his powers for the benefit of his adopted race and assumed human identity; no greater compliment can a deity pay mortal man.

There is also the romance of the story behind the story, i.e. the fairytale that saw two teenagers overcome all adversity and derision and realise a mutual dream. Shuster and Siegel created an entity that exceeded all expectations; their progeny started by giving hope to a nation in the midst of depression and grew to become a recognised icon of Americana, the popular symbol of a superpower.

Yet all fairytales are ultimately fiction and the truth is often far removed from the ideal. In Shuster and Siegel's case, they were the victims of commercial greed. They received \$150 dollars in return for the rights to the Superman story and were to spend the next forty years engaged in legal battles, attempting to gain some recognition (financial or otherwise) from the enterprise that was to make millions of dollars from their lucrative creation. Even Superman was to become a sacrifice to economic avarice. He was a consumer god and, having been consumed, was disposed of.

Yet, I think it bodes well for our society that we are still, despite our self proclaimed sophistication and material obsession, fascinated by myth to the extent that we actively generate and sustain it. In doing so we provide ourselves with a divine model to aspire to and remind ourselves that divinity is simply an expression of our potential. But on a more basic level, and more importantly, we preserve our capacity to wonder.

It humours me to think that, centuries from now, a boy might pore over a book on ancient mythology and wonder if in the twentieth century we really did worship a god called Superman. Upon reflection he might conclude that this figure was actually a phenomenon created by social factors - but to be honest I think his first impression was closer to the truth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Dawn
Christian Mythology
Pan Books
London 1986

Barrier, Michael
A Smithsonian Book Of Comic Book Characters
Smithsonian Press
U.S.A. 1985

Campbell, Joseph
The Mythic Image
Princeton University Press
U.S.A. 1974

Carpentar, Kevin
Penny Dreadfuls
Oldenburg University
Germany 1983

Denholm, Jane
Man & Superman
Design Week
Vol. 4 No. 13 March 1989
London

Eco, Umberto
Travels In Hyperreality
Pan Books
London 1986

Frazer, James George
The Golden Bough
Macmillan Press
London 1983

Galloway, David
Of Superman & Superstar; The Spent Dream
Wolkenkratzer Art Journal
Pt. 1 January 1988
Germany

Gehr, Richard
Supercity
Metropolis
Vol. 7 Pt. 9 May 1988
U.S.A.

Gifford, Dennis
Encyclopedia Of Comic Characters
Longman House
England 1982

Gifford, Dennis
Happy Days
Jupiter Books
London 1975

Heller, Stephen
When Comics Sold Soap
Print Magazine
Vol. 42 Pt. 6 1988
U.S.A.

Horn, Maurice
World Encyclopedia Of Comics
Chelsea House
U.S.A. 1980

Johnston, W. Robert
Splash Panel Adventures
Palm Press
London 1985

Kahn, Jenette
The Greatest Superman Stories Ever Told
Jenette Kahn
DC Publications
U.S.A. 1987

Kunzle, David
A History Of The Comic Strip
University Of California Press
U.S.A. 1990

Morris, Desmond
Man Watching
Penguin
London 1989

Spiegelman, Art
The New Superheroes; A Graphic Transformation
Print Magazine
Vol. 42 Pt. 6 1988
U.S.A.

Stern, Roger
The Superman Sourcebook
DC Publications

Wagstaff, Sheena
Comic Iconoclasm
Palm Press
England 1987

Various:

Smithsonian Studies in American Art
Vol. 3 Pt. 3 Summer 1989
U.S.A.

Comics:
An Idiosyncratic, Historical, and Aesthetic Overview
Print Magazine
Vol. 42 Pt. 6 1988
U.S.A.

Comic Iconoclasm
Various Contributors
London Institute Of Contemporary Arts
London 1989

Superman Comic
various issues 1 to 92
DC Publications

