

Differential–Surface: Deleuze and Superhero Comics

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Gilles Deleuze’s explicit and self-conscious entanglements with the arts are well-known, especially his particular obsession with cinema. And as multiple theorists of the emerging interdisciplinary field of comics studies have observed, there is a close connection between comics and the cinema.¹ More specifically, it is often argued that the comics, as an artform consisting of a sequence of (textual and pictorial) images, is actually both a literal and conceptual precursor of the cinema – in that cinema merely takes the individual panels of the comic book and then animates them using the camera. Consequently, it would seem that Deleuze and comics would almost of necessity have at least something to say to – and create with – each other. There is of course a tremendous variety within the medium of comic books, but following Deleuze and Guattari’s suggestion (in the Introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*) that there is something ‘special’ about the United States, I will focus on the classic comic book as it has developed there.² More importantly, it is in the U.S. the superhero genre has been most popular and widespread, and I will argue forthwith that there is something special indeed about this genre in relation to Deleuze’s thought. In short, it is in its resonances with comic books that Deleuze’s philosophy most vividly shows itself to be a form of literature. Finally, and of particular importance for this special edition of *Transnational Literature*, my analyses will reveal distinct philosophical (super)powers of concept-creation in the forms of superhero comics themselves (which Deleuze may have unconsciously harnessed in the development of his own concepts).

The first section of this essay, using the recently-published first textbook for comic studies (entitled *The Power of Comics: History, Form, Culture*), will begin with a brief description of the essential points of both the form of the comic book (or graphic novel) in general, and also the singular content of the superhero genre in particular.³ I will suggest that the central formal concepts of relevance to Deleuze’s work are the panel, the gutter and closure; and that the central content-ful concepts are myth, powers, masks and states of grace. The second section of this essay will then explore what Deleuze would term ‘resonances’ among each of the above-mentioned (formal and content-ful) concepts in Deleuze’s thinking, and more specifically from his second ‘independent’ book, *The Logic of Sense*. The concepts pertaining to comics form will include series, the Stoic image, and the empty space/occupant without a place. The concepts pertaining to superhero content will include event, incorporeal effects, phantasms, ideal games, the heroic Hercules (with his staff and cloak) and the thunderbolt. Additionally, one could export these concept inherent in comic books to non-comic analogues in the world. For example, one

¹ See, for example, Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* (New York: Norton, 2008), 5; and Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 212.

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1987), 19.

³ *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture*, ed. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009).

could analyze the invisibility of social injustice to entitled members of society as resulting from the migration of those truths to the ‘gutter’ of our society/cultural imagination.

Before I begin, however, a quick word about methodology. Most English-language Deleuze scholars have, arguably, thus far have tended to neglect the humor, playfulness and irreverence that pervade his work and are manifested in his recorded interviews.⁴ And given that, for three of many possible examples, (a) Deleuze’s philosophical heroes were Spinoza the heretic and the irrepressibly-funny Nietzsche, (b) Deleuze wrote a book connecting the Stoics to Lewis Carroll’s ‘Alice in Wonderland,’ and (c) Deleuze once compared his own philosophy to surfing, this neglect strikes me particularly problematic. In an attempt to revive this spirit of irreverent playfulness, then, my method in this essay is inspired by Deleuze’s concept, from *Difference and Repetition*, of the ‘dark precursor’ that causes two separate ‘series’ to ‘resonate’ together, his (non-)image for which is the invisible connection that races from the ground to the cloud immediately before the lightning bolt returns along that path down from the cloud to the ground.⁵

In other words, I am trying in this essay to apply Deleuze’s own playful method on his own work, to – in his terms – create a dark precursor of my own, in order to establish resonances between the series of Deleuze’s text and the series of comic books and the secondary literature on them. This is also one of the reasons that I approach these texts in the form of a sequential, literary ‘reading.’ Ultimately, of course, if the reader is willing to try this experiment of reading Deleuze – who describe his own readings of philosophers, problematically, as ‘buggering’ them in order to cause them to give birth to ‘monsters’ – in a Deleuzian fashion (albeit, I hope, less problematically), I would ask that s/he evaluate the results of this experiment according to whether or not, by the end, s/he sees a new lightning bolt about to strike the ground, or perhaps at least feels the tingling sensation of its immanent arrival. And if it does flash, the credit must go in part to the distinctive powers of comics to philosophise with lightness and humor (along with related media such as fantasy role-playing games, and time travel science fiction films).⁶

I. Superheroes’ Comic Forms and Content

The first relevant point in Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith’s *The Power of Comics* is that comic books constitute their own unique artform, which is a sub-category of the category of sequential art, the latter of which is distinguished from other forms of visual art by focusing on story-telling. Aside from the obvious example of comic books, other members of this sub-category, according to the authors, include ‘cave paintings, Grecian urns, tapestries, stained glass windows’ and more.⁷ Each is said to involve, as its basic unit of storytelling, the panel, defined

⁴ For one important interview, see *L’abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*. And for several examples of what Nietzsche would call “the spirit of gravity” in Deleuze scholarship, see *Deleuze: The Difference Engineer*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁵ For more on this concept, see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 119.

⁶ For more on time travel cinema in connection to philosophy, and Deleuze’s philosophy in particular, see Joshua M. Hall, “Time-Travel-Image: Gilles Deleuze on Science Fiction Film,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (forthcoming).

⁷ *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture*, ed. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (New York: Continuum, 2009), 3.

as ‘a discernible area that contains a moment of the story.’⁸ And this means that the panel is an essentially fluid and variable unit, given that the size, shape, contents, and interrelationships of panels in the artforms enumerated above vary considerably. A panel could also be said to correspond to the single frame of the cinema, which is the basic unit that Deleuze begins with in his analyses in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*.⁹

Moreover, in terms of comic books’ philosophical powers, the phenomenon of the panel enables them to resist the tendency, in exclusively written-language philosophy, of visually homogenizing each concept into an apparent isomorphism of structure and importance. Instead, comics can dramatise individual concepts, their relationships, and their ecologies (using the different sizes, shapes and interrelationships of the frames). Put briefly, comics, properly utilised, could facilitate more heterogeneous concept geography, thus mirroring the unavoidably heterogeneous varieties of our worlds.

Having elaborated the characteristics of the genus to which comic books belong, Duncan and Smith are then prepared to give the comic book its classical genus-differentia definition: ‘a volume in which all aspects of the narrative are represented by pictorial and linguistic images encapsulated in a sequence of juxtaposed panels and pages.’¹⁰ Notice here that the basic ontological unit is the image, which is the same unit that Bergson deploys in *Matter and Memory*, inspiring Deleuze to do the same in *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*. Furthermore, the image is characterised as being both visible and legible, which characteristic Bergson and Deleuze also attribute to the image. Narrative, in turn, Duncan and Smith then define as ‘an account of an event or a series of events.’¹¹ Here, then, one finds one of the central concepts in the whole of Deleuze’s philosophy – the event – and of singular importance, as I will show below, in *The Logic of Sense*.

Zooming back out to the level of comics’ powers in general, these imagistic and evental qualities facilitate comics’ illumination of temporality, historicity, change and process – which could be especially useful in philosophizing about phenomena in which these characteristics are essential (such as the rise of a political movement, or the diminishing respect afforded to a given scientific model in the wake of massive technological changes).

Returning to Duncan and Smith, they also observe that these narratives at the base of the comic book are actually re-spliced narratives taken from the medium of the newspaper comic strips – one might say differential repetitions of that other medium. There are important differences that emerge in this borrowing, however, including a different method of ‘encapsulation,’ defined as ‘the selection of key moments in action.’¹² More specifically, ‘though there might be sharing of *vocabulary*, each is a medium with its own *language*.’¹³ Paraphrased slightly, the claim appears to be that there is a shared semantics, but a different syntax.

Having defined the comic book initially in reference to the genre of sequential art in general, and having further clarified the issue by reference to the sister species of comic strips, Duncan

⁸ *Comics 3*.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1986), 12.

¹⁰ *Comics 4*.

¹¹ *Comics 4*.

¹² *Comics 5*.

¹³ *Comics 6*.

and Smith make a second beginning to the task, this time borrowing the rhetoric of information theory. ‘Comic books,’ they now claim, ‘are acts of communication.’¹⁴ This emphasis on activity and on communication also resonates strongly with Deleuze’s emphasis on action and communication. As acts of communication, comic books can be understood as being composed of various ‘sources’ including writers and artists, ‘gatekeepers’ including editors and corporations, ‘encoded messages’ including story and encapsulation, ‘delivery’ including distributors and retail stores, and ‘decoded messages’ including the cognitive and affective reactions of the comic book readers.¹⁵ Importantly for its connection to Deleuze, then, comic book theory is going to involve economic and political analyses as well as formal ones. Such political and economic analyses are also necessary, therefore, in thinking through the process by which comic creators’ philosophical work may be inflected, distorted, and actively suppressed, between the artist’s drawing board and the comic book retailers’ shelves.

Zooming in on the level of encoded messages, and more specifically the final level of encapsulation, called ‘composing,’ one finds more of the formal properties unique to the medium of comic books. Duncan and Smith begin by comparing-contrasting this phenomenon in comics and in the theater/cinema, thereby buttressing the connection between comic books and Deleuze-via-film. ‘Most of the *mise-en-scène* elements present on stage or screen –,’ they explain, ‘color, lighting, distance, angle, movement, setting, and *décor* – can be depicted in a comic book panel.’¹⁶ Even more interesting, though, and in support of my Deleuze-comics linkage, are the following four elements of composition, unique to the comic book medium:

First, variations in the shape of the frame can affect the meaning of what is framed. Second, the expressive potential of lines means that the brush strokes with which a picture is inked can create affective and/or cognitive reactions to an image. Third, any sound that is introduced into a comic book story has to visual and is therefore an element of composition. Fourth, comic books must effectively blend words and pictures.¹⁷

I will now attempt to elaborate the superiorities of comic books to the cinema that these four factors suggest in terms of serving as a vehicle and creative force – not just for Deleuze’s philosophy – but also for any original philosophical content of its own, as endowed by its human creators.

First, the comic book panel is much more flexible and variable than the screen onto which the film image is projected, thus allowing it to express and produce much more difference than its cinematic counterpart. Second, the use of human brushstrokes (as opposed to the photographic perfection of the camera) also allows for much greater diversity and multiplicity of images. Third, the collapsing of sound into visual images aligns better with Deleuze’s monism in particular than non-silent films (as perhaps indicated by the awkward and parenthetical place of sound in the *Cinema* volumes). And fourth, the word/picture blending goes even farther than the imagery of cinema to dethrone verbal language from its fascistic position vis-à-vis other forms

¹⁴ *Comics* 7.

¹⁵ *Comics* 7.

¹⁶ *Comics* 10.

¹⁷ *Comics* 10.

of language, expression and communication. This final point is perhaps of the greatest philosophical significance (of the four), since a perennial problem in Western philosophy has been how to accurately depict (and positively impact) a meta-verbal world using exclusively verbal language. Put positively, comic books are able to generate philosophical concepts which – like the world to which they refer – are a blend of the verbal and the visual.

Zooming back out to the model of information-theory, and then zooming in to the ‘decoded message’ level, one finds another major resonance with Deleuze’s work. ‘The receiver [i.e., reader] performs **closure** between the encapsulated moments in order to create a completed whole out of fragments.’¹⁸ This is perhaps the most important superiority of comic books to film as Deleuzian artform. Instead of the camera combining the frames into one overarching, uniform, and apparently seamless and continuous whole, the eye of each reader does this, in an infinite number of different ways for different eyes/readers, at the level of the virtual. No two repetitions of the comic book reading experience are identical, and there are only open-ended wholes, imaginatively constructed. This also suggests another philosophical power of the comic book medium, namely to preserve the idiosyncrasies of the philosopher against standardization, specifically by multiplying the original idiosyncrasies in the mind of each reader who performs this philosophical closure.

My next analyses will focus primarily on a separate chapter in *The Power of Comics* devoted to the superhero genre in particular, but I begin with two significant moments from an earlier chapter, entitled ‘Creating the Story.’ There, Duncan and Smith borrow the concept of ‘proliferating narrative’ from literary theorist Marie-Laure Ryan to describe the most common type of narrative for comic books. This is in contrast to (a) ‘simple narrative,’ in which there is one event enacted and resolved; (b) ‘complex narrative’ which includes ‘backstory, character development, and ongoing subplots’; (c) ‘antinarrative,’ in which ‘narrative elements’ ‘do not fit together to form a comprehensible story’; and (d) ‘braided narrativity,’ as found in, for example, a typical soap opera.¹⁹ Quoting Ryan, the authors explain that in this latter type of narrative, ‘the main plot functions mostly as support for the telling of adventures and anecdotes (Ryan 373).’²⁰ Duncan and Smith describe this ‘braided narrativity’ as, ‘not so much a story as it is a mythos.’²¹ And this emphasis on proliferation, and the implication that the story is always in the middle, reminds one of Deleuze’s concept of the rhizome from *A Thousand Plateaus*.²² Secondly, this ‘Creating the Story’ chapter introduces, for the first time, comic creator Neil Gaiman’s concept of the ‘state of grace,’ which Duncan and Smith describe as ‘a set of powers, appearance, supporting characters, and behaviors that are preserved in a recognizable form for the economic interests of the corporation that owns the character,’ which phrase can also be found in Deleuze’s *Logic of the Sense*.²³ Note, from Duncan and Smith’s articulation, the emphasis on power, appearance, behavior-qua-separate-from-individuals, and economics – all four of which are critical for Deleuze’s thought.

¹⁸ *Comics* 12, emphasis original.

¹⁹ *Comics* 129.

²⁰ *Comics* 130.

²¹ *Comics* 130.

²² See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 3-25.

²³ *Comics* 131.

I turn now to the chapter of *The Power of Comics* entitled ‘Comic Book Genres: The Superhero Genre.’ It begins by noting the distinctly mythic-American source of the superhero: ‘Even the superhero’s penchant for individual initiative, and “regeneration through violence” has always been engrained in the American mythos (Mark Nevins, 27; Early 71).’²⁴ At the level of direct (as opposed to symbolic) causation, Duncan and Smith reference scholar Peter Coogan’s claim that ‘the earliest comic book superheroes were derived from three primary streams of adventure-narrative figures: the science-fiction superman, the pulp magazine *übermensch*, and the dual-identity vigilante.’²⁵ Science fiction has long been a predominantly U.S. genre, the pulp magazine is an entirely U.S. invention, and the dual-identity vigilante too has arguably achieved its peak popularity here (in figures like the Lone Ranger and the Shadow).

Turning to specific and famous superheroes, Duncan and Smith claim that Superman, for one, ‘is the culmination of all three [of these] traditions,’ and Batman, for another, ‘looks to have been inspired by a number of pulp magazine adventure-heroes.’²⁶

The next section of this superhero chapter is further divided into subsections devoted to the following four conventions of the superhero genre: ‘character types, themes, narrative patterns, and visual conventions.’²⁷ I will now consider each of these subsections in turn. In the first, under ‘character types,’ Duncan and Smith define three ‘key elements,’ namely, ‘mission, powers, and identity.’²⁸ They define powers as ‘fantastic abilities or skills far superior to those of ordinary humans.’²⁹ The description continues as follows:

Part of the appeal of superheroes, and one of the reasons they have always worked better on printed paper than in any other medium, is that many of the powers, such as shooting energy beams from their eyes or lightning bolts from their fingertips, make for an exciting visual display on the page.³⁰

To relate this back to Deleuze, note first that the emphasis is on the appearance, or superficial indicators, of the hero’s powers, more so than on the powers themselves. Second, the lightning bolt is a recurring and central image throughout Deleuze’s writings.³¹

In the second subsection, which deals with superhero ‘themes,’ and begins by noting that ‘What makes these protagonists heroic is not their power, but their persistence,’ as the superhero ‘is often the underdog’ and is ‘often beaten in the first encounter with a supervillain,’ and yet, finally, ‘always return to the fray.’³² Also in sympathy with the creator of the nomadic war-

²⁴ *Comics* 222.

²⁵ *Comics* 222.

²⁶ *Comics* 223, 224.

²⁷ *Comics* 226.

²⁸ *Comics* 226.

²⁹ *Comics* 227.

³⁰ *Comics* 227.

³¹ See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, (New York: Columbia, 1994), 38, 48, 55; Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), 36, 144, 156, 240, 345; Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York Continuum, 2005), x, 165, 166; Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (New York: Verso, 1998), 83, 88, 130, 134, 200; and here, perhaps significantly, in the very last paragraph of LS (249).

³² *Comics* 227.

machine (which itself, incidentally, sounds like a character of trope from a superhero comic book), superheroes ‘teach the lesson that justice is more important than law,’ and are thereby ‘essentially outlaws.’³³

Third, the ‘narrative patterns’ subsection returns to the image of the lightning flash by noting that ‘superpowers are often acquired in a flash of lightning.’³⁴ Thus, it is not just the stylised representation of the superhero’s powers (such as a lightning flash to represent an energy beam) but also the originary transformation of the superhero that partakes of an evental quality. This subsection also returns to Gaiman’s ‘state of grace’ concept, noting that it is also deployed by comics theorist Mark Singer. Duncan and Smith’s example in this instance, using the example of the Marvel superhero called ‘Hulk’, is ‘Hulkness’ – a huge green guy in purple pants who gets stronger as he becomes angry.³⁵ A reader of Deleuze might be reminded here of the infinitive form of the event, the most frequent example of which in Deleuze, ironically, is ‘to green.’ One could generalise this point for comics’ philosophical powers in general by saying that comics can ‘infinitise’ concepts more naturally and easily than traditional philosophical media (like journal articles). That is, comics can take concepts to their logical extremes by stripping them more completely of their associations with specific individuals (and the latter’s identity conditions).

And the fourth subsection, on ‘visual conventions,’ begins by noting the two foundational conventions, namely ‘detailed musculature’ and ‘dynamic movement.’³⁶ The first is linked to the obvious eroticism of the superhero genre, with ‘skintight spandex stretched over impossibly muscled and improbably proportioned bodies.’³⁷ Monstrosity, dynamism and the pervasiveness of the sexual are of course all three ‘conventions’ of Deleuze’s philosophy as well.

This superhero chapter then concludes with the following apology for the superhero, which will also serve as a fitting transition to the work of Deleuze, as a kind of superhero of late twentieth-century continental philosophy: ‘Superhero tales are not so much a fulfillment of a wish for power as they are an optimistic statement about the future and an act of defiance in the face of adversity.’³⁸

II. Deleuze’s Super-heroics

Before getting to the actual content of *The Logic of Sense*, one encounters a Deleuzian ‘resonance’ already in the formal structure of the book, in that it is divided into ‘series’ instead of chapters, and comic books are of course a serial artform.³⁹ James Williams, in his monograph on *Logic of Sense* (hereafter LS) argues that this label is of the utmost importance. ‘Though the series follow on from one another in some key ways, and though in some sense the series are all connected, they also operate independently of the order they are presented in.’⁴⁰ This is also true,

³³ *Comics* 231.

³⁴ *Comics* 232.

³⁵ *Comics* 234.

³⁶ *Comics* 235.

³⁷ *Comics* 235.

³⁸ *Comics* 243.

³⁹ I am indebted for this insight to my friend and Deleuze scholar Christopher Davies.

⁴⁰ James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze’s Logic of Sense: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008), 15.

of course, for comic books, since the numerical ordering of their issues does not preclude (either in theory or practice) a reader from starting right in the middle. One is also reminded in this passage of *The Power of Comics*' theory of proliferating narrativity.

Turning to the actual content LS, the first formal resonance one encounters there appears as early as the first page of the Preface. It has to do with one of the two primary sources for the book, namely Stoic philosophy (the other primary source being the work of Lewis Carroll), and more specifically that the exceptional contribution from this school of philosophy can be encapsulated in an image. 'The privileged place assigned to the Stoics is due to their having been the initiators of a new image of the philosopher which broke away from the pre-Socratics, Socratic philosophy, and Platonism' (xiii-xiv). Now, obviously the Stoic philosophers produced philosophy, and philosophy is produced primarily in written language. Therefore, the nature of one of the two primary inspirations for Deleuze's book coincides with the formal uniqueness of comic books – namely the interdependency or interpenetration of words and images (one might add at the same ontological and/or discursive level). In other words, both (Deleuze's version of) the Stoics and comic books in general achieve their art by combining linguistic and pictorial images. Moreover, Deleuze closes his Preface by going so far as to describe LS as an 'attempt' at a kind of 'novel' composed of various 'figures,' and a functional synonym for the comic book is the graphic novel, which also tells its story with recourse to various kinds of figures (including superheroes) (xiv).

LS's first series, entitled 'of Paradoxes of Pure Becoming,' opens by establishing Deleuze's concern with the event, and I have already observed the centrality of the event in the form of the comic book (1). The second series, 'of Surface Effects,' introduces an emphasis on the surface as the locus or *topos* of the event, which resonates with the essentially two-dimensional form of the comic book (6). Deleuze elaborates on these surface events in terms of surface-effects, and notes that they are 'effects in the causal sense, but also sonorous, optical, or linguistic "effects",' and comic book surfaces, too, can be analyzed into representations of visual, auditory and linguistic phenomena (typically represented by images, onomatopoeia, and word/thought balloons, respectively) (7). Moreover, this surface-emphasis recurs throughout LS, particularly in the seventeenth series, where he claims (a) that the surface 'is the product of the actions and passions of the body (like a comic book surface produced by the actions of both 'external' creator-bodies and 'internal' fiction-bodies); (b) that 'a surface energy, without even being *of* the surface, is due *to* every surface formation; and from it a fictitious surface tension arises as a force exerting itself on the plane of the surface'; and finally, (c) that '[s]ense is that which is deployed at the surface' (124-125).

This second series in LS also introduces the important connection between the surface-event and humor, which evokes the etymological basis of the 'comic' book, so called because of its origin in political satire cartoons, and on a broader level, the predominantly silly, happy, positive content and narrative structure of most comic books. 'Humor,' Deleuze writes, 'is the art of the surface' (9). In this connection, he also references the near two-dimensionality of the famous 'card figures' from Carroll's Alice stories, and one could fairly describe all comic book characters as (physically/metaphysically) of necessity card figures (9). Finally from this series, Deleuze invokes 'the strip,' reminiscent of the comic strip (from which the comic book, at least

in one sense, derives) (although Deleuze had in mind, instead, the Möbius strip, i.e. a continuous surface that has only one side, since he invokes it explicitly later in LS).⁴¹

Finally, in the eighth series, ‘of Structure,’ Deleuze returns to an earlier line of thinking, wherein there is a strange object or paradoxical element or ‘differentiator,’ which is simultaneously (on one series) ‘an extremely mobile *empty space*’ and (on a second series) ‘a rapidly moving object, an *occupant without a place*, always supernumerary and displaced’ (41). And this eighth series concludes with the claim that ‘there is no structure without the empty square, which makes everything function’ (51). I would suggest that the empty square is like what is termed in comic books the ‘gutter,’ or the white space between and around individual panels. And the nomadic occupant is like each panel itself, always moving on, always in a sense restless against the disjointed background of the gutter/empty white page. The first series would be constituted of all the blank white pages and gutters, and the second series would be constituted by the totality of the panels.

If the reader finds the number of resonances between LS and comic book form in the preceding subsection underwhelming, I expect that the plenitude of examples regarding LS and the superhero genre (which has nevertheless many important connections to form, largely because the superhero genre has been far and away the most popular) will be reassuring, and perhaps even overpowering. I begin again with part of the extra-textual structure of LS (in this case a definition of one of the words from the book’s title), before returning to the beginning of LS in order to proceed with a kind of differential repetition of my previous section (of comic book form).

Regarding the title of LS, James Williams’ critical guide offers a definition of the concept ‘sense’ as ‘the alteration in the intensity of relations of series of infinitives’ and then offers the example of “‘He is green” alters the relation of “to green”, “to blunder” and “to excuse” when state about a particular new recruit.’⁴² Similarly, one could understand the sense or expression of the comic book – in its (dominant) superhero incarnation – as alternation in the intensities of relations of series of infinities of superpowers such as ‘to fly,’ ‘to become invisible,’ ‘to become super-strong’ and ‘to read another’s thoughts,’ as dramatised by the conflicts among beings (such as ‘Superman,’ ‘Invisible Woman,’ ‘the Hulk,’ and ‘Professor X,’ respectively), who have been constituted as singular by being the sites of those infinitives. To put it in Deleuzian terminology, the superhero comic book is a kind of ‘plane of immanence’ on which are deployed a variety of events or ‘lines of flight’ defined as pure differences.

The first superhero content resonance that one encounters in the text of LS itself is found on the first page of the Preface (as was also true, the reader might recall, with the first resonance with comic book form), and that resonance is that LS is a book about an author of speculative fiction (Lewis Carroll). (It seems to me that classifying superhero comic books as a subgenre of speculative fiction is uncontroversial, given that fantasy and science fiction are already acknowledged subgenres, and it is from them that superhero narratives of comic books draw most extensively for their material).

In LS’s first ‘series,’ Deleuze emphasises how, in Lewis Carroll’s fiction, the character ‘Alice’ becomes both larger and smaller at the same time; and this ability to change size is a

⁴¹ *Comics* 123.

⁴² Williams 50.

frequent superpower in superhero comics (as for example with the Hulk, who gets much larger when he transforms from Bruce Banner, and Ant-man, who gets much smaller). Moreover, given Deleuze's paradoxical observation that 'it is at the same time that one becomes larger than one was and smaller than one becomes,' it seems that it is, in a (non-Deleuzian) manner of speaking, the instant of becoming – the moment that transforms the normal body into the extraordinary – that Deleuze is isolating; and this is arguably the paradigmatic moment of the superhero (1).

Speaking of (secret) identities, moreover, Deleuze then goes on to talk about how Alice's identity and her proper name are both disrupted, or come into question, as a result of her transformative experiences. And the classic use of secret identities and alter egos seem like a classic case of this.⁴³ 'All these reversals appear in infinite identity have one consequence: the contesting of Alice's personal identity and the loss of her proper name' (3). Infinite identity also seems a fitting turn of phrase for the identity of the kind of beings who inhabit a fictional world defined above by 'proliferating narrativity'; that is, superheroes are those beings whose role in proliferating narratives grants them a kind of infinite identity. The take-home points from the first series, therefore, seems to be that (a) Carroll's 'Alice' can be thought of as a kind of superhero, and, more importantly, (b) literal superheroes (such as 'Spiderman' could perhaps serve equally well (if not better) than Alice as examples/illuminations of Deleuze's conception of identity.

LS's second 'series' offers five distinctive new resonances between Deleuze and superheroes. First, its emphasis on incorporeal entities – 'not physical qualities and properties, but rather logical or dialectical attributes' – also finds a strong resonance in the world of superhero comic books, particularly (again) with regard to the superhero's powers, whose sources, structure, techniques, applications, etc. are often of an incorporeal nature (4-5). Consider, for example, telepathic and telekinetic powers, which are a mainstay of the genre. Secondly, this series also introduces the concept of 'extra-Being,' which would be one appropriate way of talking about the being that is characteristic of superheroes in general (as compared with the being characteristic of ordinary human beings) (7). Thirdly, this second series valorises surface-ness or superficiality per se, which is in marked contrast to the stereotypical denouncing of the superficiality of comic books (7-11). In other words, perhaps the superficiality (in, perhaps, various senses of the word) of comic books is a resource that needs to be tapped into and explored for philosophical insight into Deleuze's thought. Fourthly, and most important from this series for my purposes, the concept of 'phantasm,' of pivotal importance later in the book, is here introduced, specifically as more or less a synonym for 'surface effects.'

The OED defines a phantasm as (1a) 'illusion; deceptive appearance'; (1b) 'a thing or being which apparently exists but is not real; a hallucination or vision; a figment of the imagination; an illusion'; (2a) 'An apparition, spirit, or ghost; a visible but incorporeal being.' All of these elements remind one of the comic book superhero as well. Fifth, and finally, this series speaks of the how the 'most concealed becomes the most manifest' in the form of 'a new youthfulness – transmutation' (8). This un-concealment could be related to the artificial means of making

⁴³ There is an interesting analysis of how issues of identity intersect with moral and legal judgments, in an essay called "Questions of Identity: Is the Hulk the Same Person as Bruce Banner?" by Kevin Kinghorn, in the anthology *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*, ed. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 223-236.

manifest invisible powers (such as telepathy represented by colored lines emanating from a telepath's forehead) or to the superhero identity emerging from the hiddenness of her secret identity. And the youthfulness of transmutation seems particularly apt for one of the most popular superhero comics in U.S. history, namely the 'X-men,' a group of (initially) teenagers defending human society by utilizing special powers granted them by various genetic mutations.

LS's fifteenth series, like its second series, is a veritable powerhouse of superhero resonances, and thus also deserves extended attention here. First, Deleuze claims that 'the battle' is 'the Event in its essence,' and near-perpetual combat has always constituted the heart of the superhero genre (100). Second, he writes of that which 'leaps from one singularity to another,' which reminds one of the many superheroes (such as 'Spider-Man') for whom leaping is an essential trait/power (107). Third, he defines 'this new discourse' of events and singularities as dealing with (in contrast to 'the form' and 'the formless') 'the pure unformed' which might remind the reader again of the colorful representations of energy-discharge powers (107). This connection is buttressed by the following sentence, which refers back to Nietzsche's thought on monstrosity, followed a few sentences later by a reference to the Nietzsche's 'Over-man' or, more accurately, super-person.

LS's sixteenth series is similarly rich in resonances, beginning with the idea that singularities (like superpowers) create individuals (like superheroes), in that they 'preside over the constitution of individuals (111). Second, multiple worlds (like multiple superhero series, one or more for each popular hero/team) 'appear as instances of solution for one and the same problem' (and in the superhero case, this problem is almost always how to save the world from super-villains) (114). In this vein, there have been instances in the superhero genre of multiple superheroes like the "vague Adam," that is, a vagabond, an Adam = x common to several worlds,' (the most famous instance being DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series, in which each Earth has its own Superman) (114). Finally, superheroes are defined by their powers as 'predicates which *define* persons synthetically, and open different worlds and individualities to them as so many variables or possibilities,' which is reminiscent of Gaiman's abovementioned concept of the superhero's 'state of grace' (115).

The importance of the eighteenth series is similar, although in its case primarily due to one idea/image, and that is 'the hero of Seneca's tragedies and of the entire Stoic thought,' namely Hercules (131). Hercules, with his superhuman powers, his quasi-divine origin, and his elaborate missions, is arguably the paradigmatic proto-superhero. According to Deleuze, Hercules fights monsters both '[i]nside the depths' and 'in the sky,' which are common tropes in superhero narratives (131-132). Moreover, Deleuze considers Hercules' traditional accoutrements, 'his club and lion skin' as analogues to the 'staff and mantle' or 'reversible cloak' of the Stoics, and as necessary complements to the Stoic image of the philosopher alluded to in his Preface (133). There has been more than one superhero that wore lion skins and carried clubs, and quite a few who brandish a cloak and staff, so these additional aspects of the Stoic image could be understood to strengthen its resonance with the comic book superhero.

The twenty-first series deals with 'becoming a citizen of the world,' which seems to be the ultimate aspiration/achievement of almost all of the most popular superheroes (148). (Also interestingly in this context, in a recent issue of *Superman*, the titular character renounces his

U.S. citizenship).⁴⁴ Moreover, this cosmopolitanism for Deleuze is accomplished by trying ‘not to be unworthy of what happens to us,’ which is the paradigmatic challenge in the origin story of the superhero, epitomised in Stan Lee’s dictum (from his *Spider-Man* comic) that ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’⁴⁵ Also significant from the twenty-first series is Deleuze’s characterization of ‘the actor’ as an ‘anti-god,’ which would make an oft-appropriate descriptor of various vigilante superheroes (150). Finally in this vein, Deleuze’s description of the (temporal) present of the actor as ‘the most narrow, the most contracted, the most instantaneous, and the most punctual’ hearkens back to Umberto Eco’s criticism of the comic book superhero Superman as existing in a temporality which in-authentically denies the reality of human being-toward-death.⁴⁶

The most important work done by the thirtieth series, finally, is to introduce and valorise one of the (retrospectively) most important concepts of the entire book, and one which offers perhaps the most direct justification for my entire superhero-based reinterpretation of LS, namely the ‘phantasm’ (210). The three characteristics of the phantasm, according to Deleuze, are that it is (1) ‘pure event,’ and I have repeatedly shown the centrality of the event for superhero narratives; (2) it ‘is the movement whereby the ego opens itself up to the surface and liberates the a-cosmic, impersonal, and pre-individual singularities which it had imprisoned,’ and this could appropriately describe the transformation of both person-to-superhero and outsider-to-reader; and (3) it ‘represents the event according to its essence, that is, as a noematic attribute,’ much in the same way that superhero comics could be understood as foregrounding superpowers (relative to every other aspect of the narrative/world) (210, 212, 214).

III. Conclusion: Deleuzian Philosophy as Comic Book Literature, or Comics as Philosophy

The primary benefit of the preceding analyses vis-à-vis Deleuze are that they suggest a concrete, accessible and wildly popular new medium through which to approach his singularly difficult thought. And the primary benefit from these analyses vis-à-vis comic books is that they illuminate comic books’ power, complexity, and status as both a mature subgenre of literary art, and also a productive site of philosophical expression. Consequently, the superhero genre is not merely a kind of infancy or backwardness for the comic book medium, but instead constitutes content that is naturally appropriate for that medium’s forms, and perhaps even takes those forms to their highest philosophical development, thereby offering itself to serious philosophers as a uniquely powerful medium for creating new philosophical concepts.

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⁴⁴ For more, see the following *New York Times* blog: <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/29/superman-renounces-his-u-s-citizenship/>.

⁴⁵ Spoken by the narrator in the comic in which the character of Spider-Man debuted, namely *Amazing Fantasy* (15), (August, 1962).

⁴⁶ Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman,” in *Diacritics* (2:1, 1972), 14-22.

and social justice includes a chapbook collection and 58 poems in literary journals such as *Xavier Review*, 20 years' experience as a dancer/choreographer, and consulting for Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas' upcoming MTV documentary on race in the United States.