

## Introduction

The title of this volume – *Cultural Approaches to Superheroes* – draws on a very specific approach to modern superhero studies which should venture beyond a textual-centered research. As Andy Medhurst suggests in the Introduction to *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture and Politics*, to view these fantastic, unrealistic figures less as mere entertainment icons and more as a „cultural thermometer, taking the temperature of the times.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly, since the very beginning of the modern “superhero culture” the colourful titans in spandex (as presented in comics, cinematic features, TV series or video games) have existed within two codes of reception – as Umberto Eco proposed–being simplistic and aesthetically universal vehicles of stories and hidden manifests of changing times, shifting from “champions of the people” feared by modernism<sup>2</sup> to highly relevant metaphors of cultural, racial or sexual minorities in the guise of orphaned vigilantes, alien refugees or mutated outcasts. By accepting this element of cultural and political usefulness, it would be unfair to reject superhero stories as simplistic fairy tales serving as a realm of intellectual escapism. Instead, it is far more necessary to actually embrace superheroes as one of the most relatable and flourishing aspects of modern culture that grows out from its commercial roots into greatly diverse acts in which individual heroes or their symbols are “used” or “misused” by individual users/creators as a valuable semiotic tools to challenge dominant stereotypes and interpretations.

This volume work contains five chapters that address the aspect of “usefulness” by following distinct paths to uncover the role of superheroes in shaping modern discourses and critical readings. The first article, written by Liam Burke, discusses the highly interesting and largely unknown history of Australian super-men as yet another case of shaping these indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> L. Burke, *Introduction. Everlasting Symbols*, in: L. Burke, I. Gordon, A. Ndaliansis (eds.), *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture and Politics*, New Brunswick 2019, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> A.J. Regalado, *Bending Steel: Modernity and the American Superhero*, Jackson 2017.

characters in accordance with their “local” roots and social/political needs. As Burke points out, attempts of the kind bring the fundamental issues in superhero research to the fore, such as the limits of “translation” between American and Australian models or the multilayered convention of composing the image of a superhero by incorporating non-American traces into the basic “American monomyth” structure. The second author, Jeffrey S.J. Kirchoff, covers a different aspect of “using” a specific superhero-centered text in the controversial *Masters of the Universe* film feature directed by Gary Goddard in 1987. Kirchoff demonstrates the latter to be an outstanding example enabling one to discuss fandom/anti-fandom practices of subverting/embracing a specific interpretation of a beloved franchise and its core characters. We can thus find out that the film has inspired deeply involved discussion and performative acts between the fans and anti-fans of Goddard’s work, all concerned with the core category of what is a superhero “canon” and who actually may decide what stays within this “canonical” reading and what does not. The subsequent text adopts yet another approach to the act of “using” a distinctive set of (anti)heroes as Jakub Wiczorek examines the portrayal of Marvel supervillains in recent comics as a very interesting and fully conscious process of “humanizing” the classic adversaries. As the author suggests, this creative practice can be seen as a much needed attempt to introduce a confusion of sorts between the readers and the often overly absurd foes of superheroes, who are depicted as ordinary individuals trying to live a modest living. Michał Wolski’s analysis of Thunderbolts explores a similar modality, since the author also seeks to provide a detailed elucidation concerning a popular group of Marvel’s villains-turned-heroes. By focusing on the theme of “redemption,” Wolski argues that by cases like the Thunderbolts make possible to discuss the “superhero chronotope” in the light of “overwriting” its premises to re-establish a superhero narrative. Finally, Michał Siromski provides insights into superhero-related media employed as therapeutic and psychoeducational tools. Siromski, a psychologist himself, looks at superhero comic books as a field for play therapy, narrative therapy and art therapy, revealing the “practical” potential in Batman or Superman-related mythos.

As already observed, *Cultural Approaches to Superheroes* opts for a unique and much needed research perspective to uncover the true potential of modern superhero symbols. I am deeply convinced that this volume shows at least a few analytical fields in which inquiry can be informed by the category of “practicing” or “using” particular heroes and/or hero-dedicated stories. Furthermore, one cannot fail to notice that this collection of essays may primarily be seen as an invitation to re-discover the concept of superhero

character that serves to reflect the constantly-changing image of its “users” under the flashy suits and waving capes, just as they are presented in comic books, films or video games.

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