

Rampant Lechers, Chaste Heroes

(De-)Sexualised Violence in Comic book Screen Adaptations

ABSTRACT

Violence is a central element of comic book screen adaptations in both Hollywood (Marvel, DC) and Japan. Yet while sexual violence is openly shown in film versions of manga, coded sexualised violence dominates Western productions. Positively connoted protagonists exercise violence, but no sexualised or sexual violence, in both groups. Conversely, villains are characterised by violence and some form of sexually grounded violence, but in Western films, they are ultimately repressed lechers, and only in Japanese productions do they rampantly lose their inhibitory control. Moreover, the heroes of Japanese films are noticeably less chaste than the almost ascetic-celibate romantics of Marvel and DC.

KEYWORDS

sexual violence, comic heroes, Lone Wolf and Cub, Daredevil, Watchmen, Deadpool, religious narrative

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INTRODUCTION

A reviewer keeping track of the numerous screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics released in the United States over the past decade would be hard pressed (with only two exceptions) to find one thing: sex. A dash of bittersweet romance, in rare cases a hint that “it” might happen or, indeed, has already happened, certainly, but no sex. Conversely, violence is omnipresent in film adaptations of the two big publishers’ comics, albeit to distinctly varying degrees, reflecting the respective target group, i.e. whether a PG-13 rating was sought. The other country that produces large numbers of commercially successful comics

and their screen adaptations is Japan. Here we are talking about manga and manga-inspired anime or live-action films, and here both sex and violence exist to a degree that runs counter to Western viewing conventions. This article explores the correlations between the two *scandala* sex and violence, with a focus on their importance for the embodiments of good and evil: the hero and villain. Its goal is to identify potential interrelationships and analyse their dependence on, or independence of, their cultural context. These contexts include religion broadly framed; for this reason, the last section of this article will examine the role played by religion in these potential interrelationships and modes of presentation.

On the one hand, this article deals with screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics, all of which take the form of lavishly produced motion pictures or TV series enjoying reasonable to huge commercial success. On the other hand, it looks at film adaptations of manga, a situation that is definitely more complex: to begin with, the field is not dominated by just two comparable, market-dominating publishers, but is made up of numerous studios and magazines, the best-known of which, *Shonen Jump*, publishes manga produced by a variety of publishing houses.¹ Likewise, Japan has no clear-cut equivalent of the superhero genre typical of the screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics; instead, protagonists with special powers or just extremely sophisticated combat techniques in the style of *BATMAN* (Christopher Nolan, US 2005) or *DAREDEVIL* (US 2015–)² appear in several genres. The scope of this is therefore limited to the action genre, with some excursions into fantasy/mystery, as well as to clearly identified male heroes and antagonists. It leaves out *mecha*, uses very well-known and popular – at least in Japan – screen adaptations such as *LONE WOLF AND CUB* (Kazuo Koike/Goseki Kojima, JP 1972–1974)³ as examples, and, in the case of more recent productions, chooses works that are recognisable to the extent that they have been merchandised outside Japan as well. All referenced works are *shonen* or *seinen* manga, i.e. manga primarily targeted at an audience of male adolescents or male adults aged over 18 years⁴ and hence are highly comparable with the cinema or TV adaptations of Marvel and DC comics covered in this text.

- 1 See <http://www.shonenjump.com/e/> [accessed 25.4.2017]; regarding the manga market, see Köhn 2016.
- 2 References to comics are always made as follows: title: publisher year(s), writer/illustrator, here: *Batman*: DC 1939–, Bob Kane/Bill Finger; the films mentioned here are *BATMAN BEGINS* (Christopher Nolan, US 2005) and *THE DARK KNIGHT* (Christopher Nolan, US 2008); *Daredevil*: Marvel 1964–, Stan Lee/Bill Everett and Jack Kirby; the adaptation discussed here is *DAREDEVIL*, TV series (2x13 episodes, US 2015–).
- 3 *Konzure Okami/Lone Wolf and Cub*: Futabasha 1970–78, Kazuo Koike/Goseki Kojima; live-action motion picture series composed of six films (JPN 1972–1974). The films referenced in this paper are *SWORD OF VENGEANCE* (Kenji Misumi, JPN 1972) and *BABY CART TO HADES* (Kenji Misumi, JPN 1972).
- 4 Regarding genres, cf. Brunner 2010; and Bryce/Davis 2010, 34–61.

VIOLENCE AND SEX IN COMIC BOOK SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

Violence is a central element of commercially oriented comic book adaptations for the screen in both Hollywood and Japan. The conventions of what may be shown, however, vary markedly, with differences also identifiable within the scope of Western, i.e. U.S. productions: if a “big” Marvel or DC comic adaptation is planned, the film usually aims for a PG-13 rating, which results in presentations of violence that are relatively free of bloody and physical imagery. Deliberately alternative films such as *DEADPOOL* (Tim Miller, US 2016) or *WATCHMEN* (Zack Snyder, US 2009)⁵ or TV series like *DAREDEVIL* (2015-) increasingly approach an explicitness of physical violence that is typical of Japanese anime or live-action manga adaptations. In this context, “explicit” is understood as the realistic to hyper-realistic portrayal, in close-up, of the deformative effects of violence on the body, in particular the depiction of open wounds and blood gushing forth, as well as the often irreversible destruction of parts of the human body. In both Western and Japanese comic book adaptations for the screen, physical violence is meted out both by heroes or positively connoted characters and by their antagonists. Conventional comic book adaptations – this may already be stated at this point – not only cannot make do without violence, but also have violence as a central element of the visual experience in the cinema or before the TV set.

This observation does not apply to sex. In U.S. mainstream movies or TV series in the genre of comic book adaptations, even erotic scenes where bed-sheets are positioned strategically in typical Hollywood style are almost entirely lacking. This – at least visually – asexual existence is a hallmark not only of the heroes but of their evil counterparts as well. As excessively as villains might behave in other respects, active sexuality is not among the sins they are punished for by the hero. An aspect that will be discussed below concerns the fact that closer inspection reveals the baddies to be not truly asexual but rather imbued by an inhibited, non-heteronormative sexuality which is part of the character traits underlying their evil actions. In the universe of well-known Marvel and DC comic book adaptations, there are, however, two successful (also commercially) exceptions to this observation: *DEADPOOL* (2016) and *WATCHMEN* (2009). In almost every respect, *DEADPOOL* deliberately caricatures the image of the noble superhero: Wade Wilson is a semi-alcoholic petty criminal who first enjoys a quite unromantic but intense one-night stand with his future partner before they embark on a relationship marked by very explicit, animalistic sexuality. His superhero career takes off following a dubious cancer therapy, and his hunt for the villain serves the exclusive purpose of personal revenge, although it does

5 *Deadpool*: Marvel 1991–, Fabian Nicieza/Rob Liefeld; screen adaptation: *DEADPOOL* (Tim Miller, US 2016); *Watchmen*: DC 1986/87 (graphic novel), Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons; screen adaptation: *WATCHMEN* (Zack Snyder, US 2009).

culminate in the salvation of his damsel in distress. *DEADPOOL* (2016) deliberately targets an audience that is just outside the PG-13 rating range and hence can make fun, along with the hero, of the squeaky-clean goody two-shoes peopling other comic book adaptations.

An even tougher path is chosen by the big-screen adaptation of the DC comic *WATCHMEN* (2009): the titular group of superheroes, who are publicly reviled post-1968 as brutal enforcers embroiled in government operations, for example in Vietnam, come across as a cynical, down-at-heel bunch whose members yearn to find meaning in life now that their superhero glory days are over.⁶ We actually meet a superhero, called The Comedian, who kills women and children and tries to rape a female superhero colleague. Admittedly, other than at the very beginning of the film he is only seen in flashbacks, as somebody pushes him out of a window after a short, brutal struggle during the introductory sequence. Moreover – and this is truly problematic from a feminist viewpoint – he also turns out to be the father of the young super-heroine, whose mother carries a nostalgic torch for him despite the violence and attempted rape: “Oh, we were still young. You don’t know. Things change. What happened, happened 40 years ago [...] the past, even the grimy parts of it keep on getting brighter.” Alongside other motifs, the search for his killer determines the course of the plot, which – while containing much explicit and bloody violence – has nothing to offer in terms of sexual violence except the abovementioned scene.

In the cinematic adaptations of Japanese manga, the approach to sex is an entirely different one. Even outside the *hentai* genre, i.e. explicit pornography,⁷ sexuality is shown with extreme bluntness when compared to Western visual sensibilities. Leaving out anime conceived solely for a target audience of young children and excluding certain youth protection regulations that, due to Western influence, also have been imposing restrictions on *shonen* manga and related film adaptations since the 1990s,⁸ the depiction of sexuality in the action genre is integral to the plots of both anime and live-action film adaptations. This also goes for explicit sexual violence. It is simply a part of a patriarchal society that, while sometimes punished as an element of the plot-driving narrative, is far too often shown without any expression of deeper moral judgment, not even on the part of the hero. A scene from a very successful film adaptation from the 1970s provides a good example of this: *KOZURE OKAMI* (1972–1974), based on the eponymous manga and available in English as *LONE WOLF AND CUB* (1972–1974), is a series of six motion pictures in which Itto Ogami, a former *Kogi*

6 Cf. Rauscher 2009, 42: “The hero concept of classic superhero comics is negated to a point that excludes any further nexus with this concept.” Regarding the very critical reception of the film, cf. Van Ness 2010, 171–189.

7 Cf. Winter 2012, footnote 41.

8 Cf. Winter 2012, 16.

*Kaishakunin*⁹ with almost supernatural combat skills, travels the country with his young son, offering his services as an assassin for hire; over time, he repeatedly meets members of the clan responsible for the death of his wife and his loss of status and engages them in bloody fights. In *SWORD OF VENGEANCE*, the first film from 1972, Itto Ogami comes to a village terrorised by *ronin*, samurai without a master. Ogami watches unmoved while one of the men rapes a young girl to death. He also does not start a fight with the bandits; when they threaten him, he has sex with a prostitute to demonstrate his fearlessness and probably also his masculinity. This scene is only outdone by another one in *BABY CART TO HADES*, also from 1972, when first the audience witnesses the gang rape of a mother and daughter by three wandering *watari-kashi*, itinerant low-class warriors. The fourth of these men then kills one of his companions to make him the scapegoat for the crime, before proceeding to murder the two raped women to protect the group's honour. When he notices Itto Ogami, who has been looking on, he apologises by simply saying, "I am sorry that you had to watch this unpleasant scene." Whereupon Ogami responds, "You act like a true warrior." What might still be justified here as a "historically accurate" representation of Japanese society in the early Edo period, in the 17th or 18th centuries, can also be found in screen adaptation of comics set in the recent past or the present: sexuality and sexual violence as realities that are part of the narrative.

INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SEX AND VIOLENCE

It may thus be argued that the depiction of violence in screen adaptations of comics transcends cultures, while sex is mostly blanked out in the Western context. The following section will address the question of whether interrelationships between sex (even if not shown) and violence exist, and, if so, what form they take.

For this purpose, we will first look at the villains: in almost ideal-typical manner, the villains in the screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics embody the Augustinian concept of evil as a result of desire.¹⁰ All these villains are characterised by a desire that overlays all other traits, even potentially positive ones: lust for power (world domination, etc.), for revenge following a perceived or actual wrong, for possession (usually of means required to obtain power), or, simply, for the destabilisation of the established order in order to create a chaotic regime of terror.

Quite often, this desire is shown as erotic desire gone off the rails – a desire the villain is unable to physically enact, since he is either deformed or outs him-

9 A *Kogi Ksishakunin* is a warrior officially charged by the shogun to carry out executions, a fictional position invented for *Lone Wolf and Cub*, see World Heritage Encyclopedia 2017.

10 See Brown 1991, 424–432.

self, through clothing and behaviour, as non-heterosexual.¹¹ This stigmatisation of the villain as embodying an alternative sexual orientation is certainly not a prerogative of comic book screen adaptations, but rather emblematic of numerous other villains in many action movies, ranging from Bond antagonists to Philip Seymour Hoffman in *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III* (J. J. Abrams, US 2006).¹² Suppressed and misguided if perceived from the angle of heteronormativity embraced by Hollywood cinema, this sexuality furthermore finds expression in a sexually charged sadism that manifests itself through violence and power plays involving female victims, often with the ulterior motive of breaking down the hero's composure.¹³ In this respect, however, the cinematic adaptations of Marvel and DC comics mostly limit themselves to hints which the audience may be able to decipher, but which do not require a higher age rating; thus the symbolic language of sexual violence is not implemented as real, graphically depicted sexual violence. Unfettered desire is a central trait of the villain, which derives its destructive effect not least from the fact that it represents sexually deformed desire finding expression in violence that may also be sexualised violence.

The hero distinguishes himself from the villain perhaps in no other respect as much as in this one. He does not desire, at least not in the way the villain does, whose voracity is written into his face and body, fully in line with the spirit of graphic stylisation inherent in his comic book origins; conversely, he strives for noble ideals like justice and freedom. Neither does he feel sexual desire as an expression of animalistic lust. He could fall in love with a woman or even does so. In this, the question of whether he will vent his romantic feelings through a sexual relationship with his beloved or will choose to abstain is resolved in various ways. Some heroes like Superman or Spiderman spend their cinematic life languishing and pining for their lady, while others like Thor are at least allowed a long-distance relationship with their love interest. Others – Ironman is a case in point – engage in a rather promiscuous lifestyle before following their heroic vocation but then change track to embrace option one or two. This largely celibate existence of the hero is often expressly thematised and justified with the argument that he is bound to dedicate himself entirely to his calling as saviour and opponent of evil, leaving little time for amorous entanglements, and above all by emphasising that a romantic attachment would tie him down

11 A classic example of this is the Joker in the different Batman films, but Lex Luthor in the *SUPERMAN* movies or Loki in the two cinematic adaptations of *THOR* likewise embody a (at least latently) fluid sexuality. See Winstead 2015, 572–585.

12 See Beson-Allott 2012, 215f.

13 For example, the scene between the Joker and Rachel Dawes, Batman's love interest in *THE DARK KNIGHT* (Christopher Nolan, US 2008), where the villain's words, gestures and way of touching the female protagonist's face with his hand wielding a knife represent massive invasion.

and limit him in his heroic exploits,¹⁴ which is usually demonstrated in films or TV series by the trope of having the villain abduct the hero's woman before she is spectacularly rescued by her paramour. Interestingly, this scenario also occurs if the hero actually has sex with his girlfriend in a manner quite obvious to the spectator, as for example in *DEADPOOL* (2016). The Western hero is part of the narrative of the damsel in distress, yet he is characterised even more by a total lack of sexualised violence. The nexus between sex and violence is, at most, negative, i.e. the systematic use of violence keeps the hero from engaging in a close sexual and emotional relationship; yet his potential for violence – which is thematised, sometimes drastically so¹⁵ – would never exert influence on his erotic relationship. The heroes of Marvel and DC comics conform to the Western narrative of sexuality as part of a romantic attachment, which may include emotional dependence – the reason why the hero often hesitates to engage with it – but is always consensual and non-violent.

When we turn to Japanese manga adapted either as anime or live-action movies, a considerably more differentiated situation presents itself: while, depending on the genre, the narrative of the hero's romantic desire is indeed present occasionally, we much more frequently encounter fundamentally positively connoted protagonists who – other than where explicitly underage heroes and their association with the *shoujo* genre¹⁶ are concerned – exhibit both a sexuality that may appear promiscuous to Western spectators' eyes and openly expressed desire without previous or accompanying emotional ties. However, one factor that likewise applies to these characters is their sexual partners' willingness. A positively connoted protagonist does not rape or coerce – he can get women anyway.

The situation is different for villains. Similar to the Western tradition of cinematic adaptations of Marvel and DC comics, in Japanese manga one basic trait of baddies lies in their excessive nature, their unfettered desire for whatever it is they hunger for. Some villains despise sexuality, regarding it merely as a necessary means to attain their goal, i.e. to satisfy their lust for power, such as Light Yagami from *DEATH NOTE* (JP 2006–2007),¹⁷ a character also relatively well-known in the West, who emotionally subjugates the love-struck pop starlet Misa Amane for purely tactical reasons. However, this section will look more closely at two examples where sexualised or sexual violence is staged as the ultimate expression of the destructive power of evil. The former, i.e. sexualised violence, can be found paradigmatically in a scene from *PSYCHO PASS* (Katsuy-

14 Cf. Heimerl 2016, 189f.

15 Cf. *DAREDEVIL* (2015–) and Christopher Nolan's *BATMAN TRILOGY* (2005, 2008, 2012).

16 That is, manga and anime for girls and young women.

17 *Death Note*: Konami 2003–2006, Tsugumi Oba/Takeshi Obata; *DEATH NOTE*. Anime TV series (37 episodes, JPN 2006–2007)

uki Motohiro/Naoyoshi Shiotani, JPN 2012–2013),¹⁸ an intellectually ambitious as well as commercially successful 22-episode anime TV series whose underlying theme is a post-Orwellian surveillance society, where both hero and villain are fighting for individual freedom, albeit with wildly different methods: evil Makashima holds a former classmate of female police officer Akane Tsunemori hostage before he kills the young woman by cutting her throat right before the horrified policewoman's eyes. This is preceded by a cynical discourse on the policewoman's dependence on the surveillance system while Makashima holds his scantily clad hostage directly in front of his body, repeatedly caressing her throat and body with his razor-armed hand. The sexualisation of this scene is blatant, yet no sexual action in the strict sense takes place. Instead, we witness a murder committed out of pure delight in power and in the terror the villain can thus instil in the heroine. Total power is presented as power over the female body and its sexuality. This is even truer of instances where sexual violence does indeed occur in a way clearly comparable with the above-mentioned damsel-in-distress scenario from *THE DARK KNIGHT* (2008): provocation and humiliation of the hero through the exercise of violence and the threat to kill the hero's woman. The final scenes of *BERSERK* (Toshiyuki Kubooka, JPN 2013),¹⁹ a film trilogy from 2012/13 based on a famous manga that appeared from 1989 on, present the following showdown between the villain (Griffith), who has transformed into a demon (and, in truly classic style, is also the hero's former best friend), and the hero (Guts) and his girlfriend (Casca), who is also secretly desired by the baddie: while Guts is struggling to free himself from the villain's hench-creatures, Griffith, who has become evil incarnate, rapes Casca repeatedly before the eyes of his former friend while keeping his cynical glare trailed at the hero. This is a near ideal-typical embodiment of the difference – only hinted at in the screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics – between the good, “normal”, consensual desire of the hero, as depicted earlier in *BERSERK* (2013) between Guts and Casca, and the perverted desire also revealed through the villain's transformed and perverted body.²⁰ Admittedly, *BERSERK* (2013) does not restrict itself to hints; rather, we witness first the hero's highly passionate but entirely consensual sexuality amid intact green nature and later, in a quasi “unnatural environment” cast in red-violet hues, sexual violence forced by the villain on the hero's beloved. The villain's objectives are clearly spelled out: (1) to demonstrate his absolute power and the impotence of both hero and woman, (2) to psychologically break both, i.e. the hero and his woman, and (3) to

18 *PSYCHO PASS*. Anime TV series (22 episodes, JPN 2012–2013), manga developed after anime.

19 *Berserk: Hakusensha 1989–*, Kentaro Miura; *BERSERK: THE GOLDEN AGE ARC III – THE ADVENT* (Toshiyuki Kubooka, JPN 2013).

20 On the transformation of the body as a symbol of the transformation into evil, see Feichtinger 2010, 21–25, 43–55.

attempt in this way to deprive the hero of his heroic status, reducing him to a victim or at least to an ambivalent character – which in fact does happen both in the manga and in the anime TV series released in 2016.²¹ The above-described scene of sexual violence is also the villain’s first action after his transformation into a supernatural being. It should be emphasised that *BERSERK* (2013) is no niche production but a widely known, long-lived manga and anime with a correspondingly ample merchandising background.

These few examples show clearly that the big bad villains in the screen versions of Marvel and DC comics are without exception veritable saints when compared with the evil antagonists of manga adaptations. Aspects only hinted at by Marvel and DC – i.e. the pure lust for destruction, not only of the world (which is obviously shown in opulent CGI), but also of the villain’s human antagonist at both the psychological and physical levels – are acted out and shown in screen adaptations of manga. More specifically, this level also comprises sexual integrity in connection with women. However, it should be evident by now that the villains of screen adaptations both of Marvel and DC comics and of manga are not merely rampant lechers lacking inhibitory control. Rather, sexual desire is a sub-aspect of the desire for destructive power that is a defining trait of all these characters. Yet whether and how strongly this sub-aspect is acted out is hugely dependent on the respective tradition. Conversely, only in the Western tradition are heroes relatively chaste.

SEX, GENDER, VIOLENCE

As a rule, the gender of sexual or sexualised violence in comic book screen adaptations is male, and male only. But are there exceptions? Does a sexually connoted violence exercised by women over men exist? A rather common narrative concerns the sexually harassed, degraded or even raped woman who, once she has transformed into a heroine, takes revenge on her tormentors. We encounter this motif in Marvel and DC comics – most recently in *JESSICA JONES* (US 2015)²² – as well as in screen versions of various manga. Yet this revenge, while physically violent, is not sexualised and, at most, sexually connoted inasmuch as the man is deprived of his pride and masculinity in the social sense, and hence humiliated and publicly vilified. The motif is also well known outside comic book screen adaptations as the “rape-revenge motif”.²³ Film versions of manga, too, are practically devoid of truly sexualised or sexual violence ex-

21 *BERSERK*. Anime TV series (12 episodes, JPN 2016).

22 *Jessica Jones*: Marvel 2001–, Brian Michael Bendis/Michael Gaydos; *JESSICA JONES*. TV series (13 episodes, US 2015)

23 See Read 2000, in particular 103–124 and 155–204.

exercised by women against men, with the sole exception of kicks in the groin meted out during a fight.

Conversely, evil women in both traditions opt for sexual seduction,²⁴ which results in, or can result in, violence; however, the sexuality shown or alluded to always originates with male desire deliberately stimulated by female charms. Such attempts at manipulation could at most be interpreted as covert psychological violence to undermine the sexual integrity of the male character. The nexus between open physical violence, manifested as an actual assault on the body, and sexuality – in the sense that primary or secondary genitalia are touched against the other person’s will – is almost exclusively restricted to men assaulting women.

RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES?

This section will limit itself to one single question: does the religious background of the comic’s narrative as part of the cultural background play a role in the depiction of sexuality and violence as well as of sexual or sexualised violence?

Let us look first at Marvel and DC comics. Much has been written about the religious connotations of various superheroes;²⁵ even an unabashedly and openly Catholic superhero like DAREDEVIL²⁶ has recently met with great popularity. However, the question of relevance for this paper is whether the above-described way of dealing with violence and sexuality can be explained through a (or, the respective) latently or openly religious narrative. The cultural backdrop for all screen adaptations of Marvel or DC comics discussed here is provided by the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is characterised by highly ambivalent positions regarding violence: already as cast by Saint Ambrose, the subversive-violent narratives of martyr legends tend to tip over into discreetly voyeuristic tales, to say nothing of the otherworldly, violence-drenched fantasies that we find not only in Tertullian or Saint Augustine, but also in such pious women as Saint Perpetua.²⁷ This was also the literary period that gave rise to the *topos* of the lecherous villain deprived of moral inhibitions yet unsuccessful in his lechery who resorts to sexualised violence to break his female Christian victims.²⁸ Conversely, the male Christian hero is quickly promoted from martyr to *miles Christi*, who – drawing his justification from Saint Augustine²⁹ – is certainly permitted to exercise violence against the enemies of God in order to help good prevail and

24 See Heimerl 2013, 160–171.

25 See Seydel 2009, 25–51, regarding the “ethnic origins” of Superman, cf. Tye 2012, 65–80.

26 See episodes 1.3, 1.9 and 1.13, in which the hero defines himself a “good Catholic boy”.

27 See Heimerl 2014, 234–238.

28 Ibid. regarding the legend of Saint Agatha.

29 Augustine, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* VI, 10, PL 34,781; *De Civitate Dei* I, 21, PL 41,35.

reinstate divine order. Viewing the heroes of comic book screen adaptations replete with action scenes dripping with violence as incompatible with Christianity definitely does not correspond to the historical Christian mainstream, at least from the angle of religious history; rather, their way of tackling violence constitutes a secular continuation of the Augustinian-Thomist ethic of proportional violence for the benefit of the greater whole. It is hardly surprising that sexual violence is an absolute taboo for heroes rooted in this narrative tradition. Thus the question arises whether the erotic reticence of the heroes and their sometimes open commitment to a celibate lifestyle as a tribute to their service for the benefit of society are equally beholden to Christian tradition. In my opinion, it is impossible to give a definitive answer to this question. The lone hero who might be detracted from his mission by a romantic relationship is a frequent motif of Western narrative and cinematic tradition even outside the scope of comic book screen adaptations; in fact, its origins derived from the Christianisation of heroic narratives of classical antiquity would warrant more detailed examination. Much more evident is the fact that in the Christian tradition, contrary to pagan antiquity, sexual desire and its attainment through violence are always a stigma of evil, a direct sign of the villain's sinfulness. In this sense, the villains of film adaptations of Marvel and DC comics definitely embody a Christian and, in particular, an Augustinian tradition of evil, albeit in a post-Freudian, civilised, and atrophied manner, since they hardly ever manage to actually live their desire. Rather, they sublimate it in sexually grounded violence with odd fetishes and, of course, through their desire for power and domination in a general sense.

As we have seen, the entire field of sex and violence assumes quite a different colouring with regard to both heroes and villains if we examine traditions other than the Western, Christianity-based tradition.

Outside the Western canon, a non-marital or extramarital sexuality of the hero without deeper emotional entanglements is much more evident than in cinematic versions of Marvel and DC comics, where it is limited to just a few, morally dubious heroes such as in *WATCHMEN* (2009) or *DEADPOOL* (2016) or, at most, happens before the hero's reformation, as in *IRONMAN*. The motif of the lone wolf without emotional ties – present in *LONE WOLF AND CUB* (1972-1974) already in the title – is, however, quite frequent in manga and manga-based films, which would contradict the above assumption of a Christian influence on this motif. In my opinion, it is difficult to argue that the more libertine, albeit consensual, sexuality of these heroes is a consequence of a different religious context, i.e. of Shinto and Buddhism. If religion does play a role here, then in the sense that, unlike in the West, in Japan no single religious system has been solely dominant for two millennia, and none of the religious systems present was as strongly targeted at sexuality and the related pastoral power.

Rather, it could be argued that the gender-role structure of Japanese society, which in many respects has remained highly traditional to this day, provides the background for the divergent depiction of sexuality, as this system concedes correspondingly greater sexual freedom to males and, contrary to the West, lacks the 200 years tradition of the romantic male/female relationship as the ideal locus of sexuality.

Consequently, sexual violence as part of the standard repertoire of villains, both with respect to their own actions and in their acceptance of, or incitement to, sexual violence including gang rape, is not an emanation of a religious concept of evil, but simply a transposition of real-life male behaviour into fictional narratives. In any case, this sort of sexual violence is presented as “good” on neither side of the Pacific.

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