Toufic El-Khoury

The Problem of Evil in DC Universe Animated Movies, 2007–2016

DC Multiverse, an Ironic Illustration of Leibniz's Theodicy?

ABSTRACT

This article explores the question of evil and its metaphysical and moral implications in a series of animated movie adaptations of the DC Universe produced since 2006. The contemporary evolution of the medium, called the "Iron Age of comics", has seen the auto-reflexive nature of comics produce problems and themes related to the main question discussed in Christian theodicy: how can we perceive and define the possibility of evil in a world where God's omnipotence should have eliminated such a possibility? Moreover, why does evil seem to spread indefinitely in spite of all the efforts deployed by superheroes to stop evil? We will discuss the problem of evil as a natural narrative topic in light of comics' mythological and religious roots and with a particular study case: DC Comics Multiverse as an illustration of Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds" argument.

KEYWORDS

DC comics, animated movies, cinema, theodicy, problem of evil, Leibniz.

BIOGRAPHY

Toufic El-Khoury is a lecturer and coordinator at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts and at the Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut. He holds an MA in Philosophy (Université Saint-Joseph) and a PhD in Film Studies (Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7). He is the director of the collection "Cinématographies" (Orizons, Paris) and the author of *La comédie hollywoodienne classique (1929–1945): Structure triadique et médiations du désir* (2016).

As the result of external or intra-generic influences, every movie genre organizes and matures in its aesthetics, its codes, and its thematic, triggering the curiosity of philosophy.[1] In the field of Film Studies, philosophers have recently

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1   We follow the definition of a movie genre suggested by Rick Altman and Raphaëlle Moine: the semantic-syntactic-pragmatic definition. The semantic elements are the narrative and visuals codes, the

become interested in movies, intrigued not only by selected authors or film aesthetics, but also by movie genres. Following the interest of Stanley Cavell in Hollywood comedy and melodrama, other philosophers have explored the codes and themes of established genres: Robert Pippin with film noir and the Western[2] and, in France, Eric Dufour with horror movies and science fiction.[3]

Movies and TV series adapted from comics and, more specifically, from the Superhero genre are starting to attract interest beyond the circle of critics and film historians.[4] The superhero movie is still at its beginning, whereas superhero comics have a longer and richer history, but with the release and success of SPIDER-MAN (Sam Raimi, US 2002) and the steady production of superhero movies since 2002, the superhero genre has taken form – before 2002, the rare hits were scattered and limited to the most iconic figures of the genre, Superman and Batman.[5] Even though the genre still has to prove its potential, through a philosophical and generic approach we can identify thematic links between these movies. Those topics will consolidate and appear more clearly when filmmakers and screenwriters free themselves of the simple fan's nostalgia for comics, for then they will be able to concentrate on the genre's mythical potential and its ability to address universal topics in a specific socio-cultural context.

In terms of the contemporary syntax of the superhero movie, one of the most relevant topics of the genre is the problem of evil. This focus is the most solid link between those movies and their mythological and religious roots. References to Christian theodicy and to political debates underline the authors' efforts, since the 1980s, to free the genre of its childish yoke, making possible diverse illustrations of our world's complex issues.

THE IRON AGE, THE THIRD AGE OF SUPERHERO COMICS: AN AGE OF PESSIMISM?

In the history of superhero comics, three "ages" are usually delimited: the Golden Age, Silver Age, and Iron Age, the third one being the most discussed. Many

genre's familiar "iconography". The syntactic elements are the "thematic undercurrent", topics and subjects linking a series of movies on a deeper level. The pragmatic aspect (suggested by Moine) refers to the public reception and the genre's acceptance in a specific socio-cultural context. The exact definition of a genre depends on a certain equilibrium and on the interaction of those different aspects in a particular historical period of production. See Altman, 1984, 6–18; Moine, 2008, 10–25.

2   See Pippin 2012; Pippin 2010.

3   See Dufour 2006; Dufour 2011.

4   We already have examples: White/Irwin /Arp 2008; Forest 2009.

5   In a book he edited in 2009, Claude Forest suggested the production of superhero movies was still too limited for him to write about the superhero movie as a movie genre (see Forest, 2009, 12–13). In 2016 that is no longer the case, as a result of the impressive commercial domination of those movies in U.S. and international markets, with film series like THE AVENGERS (Disney), BATMAN (Warner), and X-MEN (Fox).

exhaustive studies already exist on the subject.[6] Three tendencies in the evolution of the superhero genre since the 1940s stand out: a more realist approach in characterization, an internalization of the hero's conflict, and an exacerbated pessimism.

The heroes introduced during the Golden Age of comics (late 1930s to mid 1950s) were largely perfect and infallible. Most of the modern superheroes archetypes and prototypes were developed, but they remained monochromatic – the first versions of Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman, for example. In the Silver Age of comics (late 1950s to mid 1970s), the superheroes were depicted in a realistic way: often tormented, they had to face extraordinary challenges as well as daily and domestic problems. It was the age of Spiderman, the superhero in the midst of a teenage crisis, or the X-Men, who symbolically illustrated the anxieties of stigmatized minorities within a context of civic and social protest.

In a book on Marvel's universe – Marvel was DC Comics' main competitor – Anthony Mills, an American theologian, talks about a "turn to reality" in 1960s comics:[7] the characters became anchored in a concrete reality and were more recognizable, more "organic". This new "turn" distanced them from the values of the American monomyth, a contemporary adaptation in U.S. literature of a concept introduced by Joseph Campbell:[8] in comparison to the more individualistic, agnostic hero of the monomyth, the Silver Age hero was more dynamic, interactive, and interdependent. Mills is able to identify decidedly evangelical features in this new kind of hero.

But this period contained in embryonic form all the next period's excesses: while the Silver Age hero's conflicts were more internalized, creating more nuanced characters, the hero's "humanization" was replaced in the 1980s by existential crisis, with the hero calling into question his teleological ethics. From perfect hero to realist hero (undermined by his own demons), the superhero was finally confronting an imperfect and fallible world that underlined the vanity of his actions. In the wake of this new reality a new superhero appeared, with pronounced nihilistic tendencies – in a medium still criticized, strangely enough, for its childish naïveté.

How does this "revisionist" turn, which defines the Iron Age of comics, modify the genre's syntax? The conception of the main heroes has been completely modified, but above all, this new tendency emphasizes a meta-narrative dimension of the genre, allowing a meditation on the story and formal mechanisms of the medium and on its main syntactic elements. Like myth, the genre raises questions that lead to "labyrinths" (a term borrowed from Leibniz) in which

6   See Darowski 2016, 3–16.
7   Mills 2013, 97–98.
8   See Campbell 2013, 25–45.

reason has a tendency to go astray. Moreover, one of those questions, both central and universal and also intimately linked to the superhero genre's syntax, is the question of evil, of its origins and its production in today's world.

DC COMICS UNIVERSE REVISITED IN ANIMATED MOVIES

The movies considered in this article are animated adaptations of DC Comics Universe, produced since 2006, with two, sometimes three movies per year. They are adapted from classics of the 1980s or hits from the 2000s – both decades belong to the Iron Age of comics. Those movies are short (around 75 minutes each), were made on a limited budget, and have a narrative fluidity and concentration that call to mind mythic narratives. More importantly, those movies are very dark: faithful to the modern comics' syntax, they often represent the end of a civilization or the world, and they mostly explore the shadowy side of every hero, not only of those, like Batman, whose dark side is the core element of their persona. Despite the format, the movie's length and the limited release (they are for the most part direct-to-video releases), or maybe *because* of those criteria, these movies often offer profiles of the superheroes that are more complex than those of the live-action blockbusters.

These animated adaptations primarily emphasize one of the main topics of comics' revisionist era: the sensitive question of evil's existence and production. Partly due to its mythic roots and narrative conventions, the superhero genre revolves around that question, confronting it, trivializing it, and deconstructing it. The excesses that often burden the genre, the over-dramatization of issues and story (maintaining a sometimes improbable balance between narrative obligations and spectacular imagery[9]), serve to stress the question as well as the ideological and philosophical contradictions of the revisionist period. The question that the superheroes henceforth ask (a question that drives them into doubt and despair and gives their hesitations an existential dimension) is the following: if we devote our lives and our superhuman powers to the good of humankind, how can humankind still be evil? Worse, why do the only palpable results of our efforts seem to be the expansion and constant renewal of evil?

American comics are strongly influenced by Christian theology. Though created by two Jewish authors (Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster), both children of European immigrants, who imagined Superman as an alien vainly longing for his lost homeland, the iconic superhero's "mythology" borrows heavily from the Gospel narrative, probably in response to the general public's cultural sensibilities. Movie adaptations by Bryan Singer (2006) and Zack Snyder (2013) clearly underline this aspect of the protagonist, representing the character as a saviour

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9   See Pagello 2013, 5–6.

sent by his father to lead humanity to peace. But while Superman's story can be read in light of Christology, Iron Age comics are increasingly impregnated with Christian eschatology, more specifically with the futurist approach of Protestant eschatology that sees in the gospels of Matthew (24:15) and Luke (21:20), in the texts regarding the Great Tribulation, the foretelling of the end of the world.

In the genre's evolution during the last three decades, we can identify two main modifications to the medium's syntax: the loss of the Golden Age comics' lightness and naïve optimism, and the borrowing of science-fiction elements, and especially its dystopian features, with twentieth-century adult science fiction preferring a darker vision of humankind's future.[10] Those elements are recurrent during the Iron Age and can be identified in the major publications of the 1980s, all of which were adapted into movies in the 2000s: *Days of Future Past*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, and *V for Vendetta*.

When we consider the blockbusters of the last 15 years, and specifically the 25 biggest worldwide hits of each year, we notice that a growing proportion of those movies shows, in different ways, massive destruction, whether of a city, a country, a civilization, or even the whole world – between one and three films per year in the mid 2000s, eight in 2013 and 13 in 2014 (7 of those 13 movies were among the 10 biggest hits of the year). In dystopias, post-apocalyptic movies, disaster movies or Superhero film, images of massive and global destruction became not only the visual and narrative convention of a blockbuster, but also a promotional tool.

We do not yet have the hindsight that is necessary if we are to identify clearly the symptoms behind the recent apocalyptic imagery – that task awaits cultural studies in the future.[11] But it is noteworthy that popular cinema, usually a medium of escapism and comforting utopias, now targets the fundamental fears of the spectator. The "cinema of catastrophe" (in which we can place the genres referred to earlier) is today the most popular cinema worldwide.

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10   It seems natural that genre borrowing from science fiction would eventually produce a more pessimistic illustration of humanity's future. Science fiction itself rapidly grew beyond the utopian bursts of the nineteenth century and became increasingly associated with dystopia. The works of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne are good examples: both authors re-evaluated the optimism of their first novels and by the end of their literary careers were presenting a darker vision of the future. Superhero literature has a time delay when compared to science fiction. It inherited the lightness and optimism of science fiction at the moment the latter was losing these characteristics after the bombing of Hiroshima and during the Cold War. In the early 1980s, however, the same kind of disenchantment caught up with the superhero genre.

11   The literature representing the apocalypse, or any story reminiscent of the Gospel's Great Tribulation, never appears ex nihilo. Recently, Muriel Debié, a research director at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, launched a project on apocalyptic writings of the seventh and eighth centuries, focusing in particular on those of the Middle East region during the Muslim expansion. Every major turmoil in a society's social, political, and cultural fabric leads inevitably to the rise of an end-of-days literature.

The twentieth century saw destroyed every form of optimism inherited from the age of the Enlightenment: the two World Wars transformed Rousseau's human perfectibility into a pitiful utopia. German expressionism and American film noir were among the cinematic outcomes of this new existential pessimism. But even if it is impossible for us to know the reasons for the rise of the cinema of catastrophe, we can try to understand how that cinema suggests, in its own way, the deconstruction of philosophy's humanist certainties and relaunches necessary arguments related to the problem of evil. The cinema of catastrophe discusses evil, but not in the way the tale (a distant ancestor to the superhero genre) discusses evil, where the intention is to prepare the child for the dangers of adulthood. Freeing itself from the conventions of the tale, for better or for worse this cinema addresses the adult, drawing on diverse and complex means to discuss the issue of evil.

This last age of comics cannot be dissociated from Christian theodicy, whereby God's omniscience remains inseparable from his infinite kindness despite the presence of evil in the world. The existence of evil in a world where God's kindness is elevated to the status of absolute continues to haunt Christian thought and, by extension, American literature.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL
AS THE CORE TOPIC OF THE SUPERHERO GENRE

The question of evil's existence, or being (or absence of being), is not fortuitous within a genre's narrative that works mainly in dichotomist terms and with radical oppositions, borrowing from ancient mythologies as well as Christian iconography. The conventional opposition in the superhero genre sees the birth of the hero naturally followed by the creation of his nemesis – an idea initially illustrated in SPIDERMAN (Sam Raimi, US 2002).[12] But DC animated movies also explore evil, its existence and the legitimacy of the hero's actions to put an end to it, in a more subtle manner, behind the veneer of dualist oppositions. The question of evil has political, moral, religious, psychological, and metaphysical implications, some of which are introduced here.

Evil is defined as the negation of good. Such negation is found in many confrontations in comics, the most iconic being the battle between Batman and the Joker. Evil is thought of as an absolute, a universal notion generating moral codes shared by many cultures – for example, the Sixth Commandment, which forbids the act of killing, draws a line some superheroes choose not to cross.

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12   The idea also appears in UNBREAKABLE (M. Night Shyamalan, US 2000). Shyamalan's movie anticipated the commercial domination of the superhero genre over the next decade, while developing, in an almost avant-garde way, a meta-filmic and critical approach to the genre's syntax. See Pagello 2013, 6–7.

Some movies contribute to the debate over the distinction between justice and vigilantism: the protagonist evolves in the margins of the law while pretending to serve it; interprets, transgresses, or judges it inefficient; and finally follows a more personal (and often ambiguous) ideal of justice. This process leads to a graduate deletion of the distinction between what René Girard calls private vengeance (based on vendetta codes) and public vengeance (a non-arbitrary application of the law).[13] The movies featuring Batman, adapted from 1980s classic comics, are often concerned with this topic: Batman: Under the Red Hood (Brandon Vietti, US 2010); Batman: Year One (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2011); The Dark Knight Returns (Jay Oliva, US 2012–2013).

Evil appears not only in Manichaean oppositions but also in confrontations of opposite points of views, linking to Hegel's definition of tragedy:[14] Justice League: The New Frontier (Dave Bullock, US 2008); Batman: Under the Red Hood (2010); Justice League: Doom (Lauren Montgomery, US 2012).

In other cases and especially in some recent interpretations of iconic characters (and in a way that contradicts the first point), evil appears in the actions of an individual engaged in a precise teleological process, the violent reform of a fallible world. As long as the objectives are noble, everything is allowed. The hero's actions are to be judged not in light of principles, but in the light of issues and circumstances. Evil here is thought of from a utilitarian angle, with one evil preventing another evil with more disastrous consequences. This cynical ascertainment of fallen characters can be found in Superman vs. the Elite (Michael Chang, US 2012), Batman: Under the Red Hood (2010) and Batman: The Dark Night Returns (2012–2013).[15]

Each category represents a possibly productive route for study as long as the genre evolves and matures – and there is still a substantial margin for improvement.[16] However, a first potentially interesting topic to explore from a moral and religious perspective, it seems to me, concerns the action's relevance: is

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13   See Girard 2011.

14   In *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* and his *Aesthetic Courses*, Hegel talks, for example, of Sophocles' *Antigone*, a work of which he thinks highly, and of the opposition between Creon, the representative of human law, and Antigone, the defender of divine duty. As Mathieu Thibodeau summarizes, the tragic heroes are bound to "confront their compatriots, to assert their point of views, to promote their interests and to defend their own conception of the truth" (my translation). This situation leads them into unresolvable conflicts with others, bringing disaster and death. See Thibodeau 2011, 35.

15   Movies featuring Batman are frequently cited here due to the ambivalence created by a character who follows his own moral code but eventually expresses a certain faith in humankind. In Justice League: Doom (Lauren Montgomery, US 2012), a group of villains steals plans that had been elaborated by Batman in order for him to be able to neutralize, if the need arose, his own powerful allies (Superman and Wonder Woman, for example) should they lose their innocence by fully realizing the potential of their unlimited powers. The villains eventually deploy what Batman had considered a deterrent.

16   We can add to those different categories a debate related to a present political reality: the Cornelian dilemma involving individual liberty and security. See, for example, Marvel Comics' *Civil War*, which was recently adapted for the big screen. Some critics have already linked this question to Erich Fromm's thesis about "the Basic Human Dilemma" between unlimited freedom and security. See Langley 2016.

action good if it only generates chaos? This question seems to haunt modern superheroes, since their fight is endless. Despite their efforts and good will, their involvement in the world's affairs does not restore a lost equilibrium, but instead generates new distortions. Condemned by their chosen actions to a punishment worthy of Sisyphus, they multiply their efforts but appear to acknowledge, in the end, the vanity of those efforts. The frequent borrowings of dystopian elements during the Iron Age contribute to this growing feeling of fatalism, and of a sense that the modern hero is unable to change anything in the world from what it is condemned to be – or to become.[17]

This modern superhero inability places the superhero within a long tradition of anti-heroes, initiated by Don Quixote and prevalent in modern literature. Like Cervantes' hero, the superhero genre protagonists are helplessly willing to follow a given ideal or any recognizable paragon of moral rigour.

DC COMICS' MULTIVERSE:
AN IRONIC ILLUSTRATION OF LEIBNIZ'S THEODICY?

While Marvel sets up its own cosmogony with its layers and hierarchies, DC Comics prefers to create parallel worlds and timelines that can interact thanks to the ability of some protagonists (Flash, Lex Luthor) to travel from one world to another. The Multiverse, made up of an infinity of earths that serve as mirrors for one another, was introduced in the 1960s but elaborated in the 1980s. It allows the implementation of many versions of the worlds created by DC Comics, and above all of different versions of their iconic characters: DC authors rework and reinvent their origin stories and their profile, restart popular narrative arcs and erase less popular ones.[18] In addition to its obvious promotional potential, the Multiverse also enables new and diverse thematic ramifications.

In one of the DC Universe animated movies, this story arc is developed substantially. JUSTICE LEAGUE: CRISIS ON TWO EARTHS (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2010) centres on the conflict between the usual DC heroes, reunited in the Justice League (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Flash are all members), and their alter egos from another earth, who compose a group called the "crime syndicate" that spreads terror in the parallel world. In this alterna-

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17 In the 21st episode (of 23) of season four of ARROW (Greg Berlanti, US 2015–2016), an atomic missile launched by the season's villain explodes in an American town, causing the death of "tens of thousands". What could have been that season's high point, or the catastrophe the protagonists of the show tried to prevent for all 23 episodes, becomes the climax of a single episode, and the hero and his allies live it with a strange kind of resignation. The higher stakes of the next episode (the end of the world) might seem to explain the banality to which the event has been reduced, but perhaps the explanation lies in a sort of narrative laziness or, maybe worse, in the fact that in the contemporary superhero universe, an end-of-the-world narrative is not something a superhero tries to fight or avoid: the superhero must ultimately simply accept its inevitability. The superhero is not a shield against the dooming of the world, but just a "beacon of hope", as the protagonists say, in a doomed world.

18 See Pagello 2013, 2–3.

tive earth, all roles are inverted: Lex Luthor, usually Superman's nemesis, is the leader of the heroes, while Superman's alter ego is the villains' leader. Luthor is able to travel from one world to another and asks for the Justice League's help. The superheroes will travel to the parallel earth to put an end to the crime syndicate's reign of terror.

In this conventional plot, based on *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (2001) by Marv Wolfman and George Perez, one element stands out. Amongst all the superheroes' monstrous doubles, Batman's alter ego, called Owlman, is the most intriguing character. He discovers the existence of infinite earths, and in particular that of "Earth-prime", the earth from which all other earths originate. After blackmailing the governments of his world with a weapon of mass destruction, he finally decides to use his weapon on Earth-prime, thus erasing all reality. When his mistress asks him why a man of reason (and, like Batman, he seems to be an extremely rational character) would do such a thing, he claims that the discovery of infinite parallel earths made him realize the vanity of his actions, with the actions of his doubles on other earths nullifying the *raison d'être* of his actions. He justifies his plan at length:

> Because it is the only action one could take that would have any purpose … Every decision we make is meaningless. Because somewhere, on a parallel earth, we have already made the opposite choice. We are nothing, absolutely nothing. [Here, we are rich, we are conquerors], and here we are poor, we are slaves, and here, our parents never met so we were never born. Here, the World ended in nuclear war, here, no fish was ever brave enough to crawl up on land and humans never evolved, and so on, ad infinitum[19].

In the character's mind, the decision to erase all reality means no other version of him will be able to make an alternative choice.

One scientific inspiration of DC's Multiverse could be the Everett Interpretation, or many-worlds interpretation, in quantum mechanics, formulated in the 1960s.[20] One can argue that this theory, extremely popular in the United States and reworked in many science-fiction subgenres (most obviously, perhaps, in Uchronia) was the direct influence on the development of the Multiverse narrative in DC Comics. The dynamics of evil, a core aspect of this narrative, is better underlined, however, by a philosophical questioning.

Indeed, the nihilistic assertion noted above by a character confronted with the painful discovery of infinite earths and his subsequent action articulate two

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19 Justice League: Crisis on Two Earths (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2010).

20 Many-worlds interpretation, initially suggested by Hugh Everett, stipulates in short that all alternate worlds and futures are "real" and that every world that could have been possible because of alternate choices or events in the past actually occurred in other worlds considered alternate realities. This theory is illustrated by the Schrödinger's cat theorem.

aspects of the problem of evil, also discussed by Christian theology: moral evil (the inability of humans to free themselves from sin, a constituent part of their nature) and metaphysical evil (is evil a part of God's creation?). Those two aspects, frequently illustrated in American comics, are tightly linked in many animated adaptations of the DC Universe, whose generic syntax they refine.

Concerning moral evil, the first aspect, we find a general feeling of fatalism evident in comics and their adaptations, and notably in the DC Comics–adapted story arcs. This feeling links the modern superhero to anti-heroic figures popular in classical genres such as film noir of the 1940s: anti-heroes are aware of the inevitable failure of their actions, but are also unable to act in any other way. Robert Pippin, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, raises the issue of agency in a series of classic films noirs, asking, "What could action and agency at all look like where there is almost no credible sense of any 'space of possibility' left; when the suspicion is that the very idea of someone running the show, leading his or her life, begins to look naïve or self-deceived?"[21]

In the contemporary superhero genre, this question is picked up in the protagonists' seeing their area of action and influence gradually reduced, which is tragic considering that their archetype is defined by altruistic intentions. With a character like Owlman, the monstrous double of a superhero with an already dominant shadow side, this discovery only leads to a radical re-evaluation of free will, and by extension of humanity.

Concerning metaphysical evil, the second aspect, DC Comics' Multiverse reminds us of the central argument of Gottfried Leibniz's *Theodicy*, and the assertion that our world is "the best of all potential worlds". At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Leibniz, a German philosopher and mathematician, participated in a theological debate related to the co-existence of evil and God in a world created by the latter. Like many theologians of his time, Leibnitz was eager to resolve the question of the existence of moral evil (sins, injustices) and physical evil (sufferings) in a world created by an omnipotent God, but he faced a problematic contradiction in the New Testament's having elevated the attributes of good and love in God to absolutes.[22] To the question of why God allows evil in a world God had the power to create perfect, Leibniz maintained that the existence of evil is necessary, evil being the criteria by which good acts are evaluated. Functioning like the weight on a scale, it allows the positive of humanity to be gauged. God must have assessed the different possible combi-

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21 Pippin 2012, 10–11.
22 Even if theodicy as the "justification of God" already existed in Greek and Latin philosophy, it was with the rise of monotheistic religions, and the defence of an all-powerful and omnibenevolent God that this question became more and more pressing for dogmatic thought.

nations and would have chosen the best possible combination, with the optimal complementarity of good and evil.[23]

This idea is illustrated in the DC Universe in a way that is faithful to Leibniz's imagery. Parallel worlds offer nightmarish versions of the initial world and imagine what could have been the fate of the famous superheroes had the circumstances of their initiation been different. Those stories work on the dark side of each character, acknowledging the extent of the character's powers and the nature of the character's demons.[24]

On another level, however, this universe seems to offer a parody of Leibniz's metaphysics. Superheroes can be seen as extremely humane (since the turn to reality of the 1960s, their weaknesses have underlined their humanity) or as pathetic representations of divinities. Superhero stories may initially have been conceived as modern adaptations of Greek and Nordic theogonies, but the influence of the characters on their environment was gradually reduced in the contemporary age of comics. Hence, despite their powers they are unable to achieve a purpose (counter evil deeds) with just their good intentions or, worse, without the use of questionable means – and one of Leibniz's critiques echoes here: isn't an omniscient, omnipotent God by definition supposed to be able to achieve the goal of a better world without having to resort to evil?[25]

Even if theodicy seemed to lose its impact after the nineteenth century, the shockwaves and existential crisis generated by the Second World War, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima in the second half of the twentieth century renewed interest in theodicy's central questions. Two texts published in the 1980s shed light on this renewal: Hans Jonas' *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*, published in 1984, and a conference paper given by Paul Ricœur at the University of Lausanne in 1985, "Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology"[26]. Hans Jonas, a German philosopher, student of Husserl and Heidegger and friend of Hannah Arendt, was deeply affected by society's sudden decline into extreme violence during the 1930s and 1940s and became obsessed with human civilization's finitude.[27] In his 1984 essay, he re-evaluated the pertinence of theodicy's arguments for the contemporary world. One new question arose: how can we still

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23 See Leibniz 1969.

24 Following Leibniz's assertions, many philosophers of the seventeenth century discussed the central issues of theodicy, among them Emmanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel (in chapter six of The Phenomenology of the Spirit). Kant's study of Job, found in an essay of 1791 entitled *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,* constituted a first attempt to revise the theories on which theodicy is constructed. Against theodicy he raised the idea of anthropodicy (justification of humankind as good). In the dialectic chapters of *Critique of Pure Reason*, theodicy falls under what he designates "transcendental illusion". He does not exclude the question of evil from philosophical discourse, but places it in the "practical" sphere, as something that must not be and that action fights. Therefore, the main concern is not where evil comes from, but why we commit it. See Ricœur 1985, 41–42.

25 See Franklin 2003, 97–101.

26 This keynotewas also previously given at the American Academy of Religion, in 1984.

27 A subject also discussed by Hannah Arendt in *Qu'est-ce que la Politique?* (1955–1958).

accept the idea of an omnipotent God after Auschwitz? This contextualized reconsidering of theodicy's basic questions had become necessary for Jonas, who, as a Christian, rarely questioned the existence of God but did try to understand God's apparent laisser-faire. In this context, we must start by abandoning the idea of an omnipotent God, for human reason cannot accept that a being capable of stopping the horror of Auschwitz did not do so. However, Jonas's argumentation is interesting in that he tried to explain the paradox of a powerless God by proposing a personal interpretation, we could say even a rewriting, of the creation myth as, "In the beginning, God, in an unfathomable choice, decided to indulge in chance, risk and in the infinite diversity of fate".[28] Then God trembles because, carried by his own impulsion, "the shock of evolution crosses the threshold at which innocence ceases, and new criteria of success or failure appear".[29] Jonas separates the ideas of goodness and omnipotence in God, who abandoned the latter at the world's creation.

Jonas' efforts to rethink theodicy by relying on myth's codes have their charm but also their limitations. In the beginning of his essay mentioned above, Ricœur expanded on how myth incorporates a fragmentary experience of evil into origin stories with cosmic dimensions, offering initial explanation of the existence of evil. However, myths do not avoid paradoxes and ambiguities while trying to explain the origins of evil: they constitute a partial response, with consolatory effect, to the questions of where evil comes from, why, and for how long. Myth answers the "why" question, but fails to find a response to "why me?" Metaphysics and then moral philosophy take over.[30]

Ricœur then reviews how Leibniz's *Theodicy* places under the same concept, and the same source, disparate terms such as sin (a moral evil seen in the responsible agent that inflicts pain), suffering (seen from the perspective of the victim who receives pain), and death. Ricœur rethinks evil, in light of Kant's reassertions, in its "relational-dialogical structure",[31] with evil inflicted by one echoing in the evil suffered by the other. The synthesis he offers of the many aspects of theodicy reminds us of the need to confront the problem of evil even when God is no longer at the centre of philosophical systems.

In the third act of JUSTICE LEAGUE: CRISIS ON TWO EARTHS (2010), and while setting his diabolical plan in motion, the Owlman character seems to point a finger at the human's free will, another controversial subject discussed by Leibniz. Having teleported himself onto Earth-prime but before he activates his bomb in order to erase every form of existence, he is confronted by Batman, his alter

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28   Jonas 1994, 14 (my translation).
29   Ibid., 20 (my translation).
30   Ricoeur 2010, 27–28.
31   Ibid., 24.

ego, who has followed him in order to stop him. Owlman explains to his nemesis, and double, the nature of Earth-prime, where they now find themselves:

> Before there was thought, there was this place, one Earth with a single History. But with the coming of Man came the illusion of free will, and with that illusion came chaos. With every choice we make, we literally create a World. History branches in two, creating one earth where we made the choice, and a second where we did not. That is the secret of the Universe. Billions of people, making billions of choices, creating infinite earths. Some so similar to each other you could spend a lifetime searching for any distinction, other so radically different they defy comprehension. ... The source of the cataclysm was the same as it always is: Man[32].

The character's explanation of the Multiverse's functions reminds us of the place of free will in Leibniz's system. Emile Bréhier, a French historian of philosophy, summarizes this system as follows:

> In this system where only individual substances exist, where everything arises from their spontaneity, nothing is considered that is not linked to the whole universe; those substances are already universes and there is nothing they do not include, at least virtually: each of these substances, that seems to include everything, is in fact defined by its relation to all the others, and by a fixed place in a hierarchy that comprises doomed beings as well as angels and chosen ones."[33]

In a way, Owlman's assertion is rather Leibnizian, since it afflicts humankind with all the evils of the universe. In his theodicy project, where the initial idea was that evil had corrupted the relations between God and humankind, Leibniz found himself in a quandary as he sought to justify God's actions, for he was unable to exonerate one without holding the other guilty, "oscillating between the temptation of forgiving himself by accusing God, and pardoning God by accusing himself".[34]

Like Leibniz, the Owlman character locates evil solely in human action and responsibility. But unlike for the philosopher, for the Owlman every possibility of optimism or empathy is then erased, for humankind and humankind's free will are a cancer from which the world must be delivered, even if to do so means the destruction of the world and of himself – for, by his own admission, he himself is as imperfect as all the others. A physical and verbal confrontation ensues, dur-

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32 JUSTICE LEAGUE: CRISIS ON TWO EARTHS (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2010).

33 "Dans ce système où seules existent des substances individuelles, où tout découle de leur spontanéité, il n'est pas fait la moindre part à rien qui ne soit fonction de l'univers tout entier, c'est que ces substances sont déjà des univers et qu'il n'est rien qu'elles ne contiennent au moins virtuellement : chacune de ces substances, qui paraît être tout dedans, n'est en réalité définie que par ses rapports avec toutes les autres, et par une place fixe dans une hiérarchie qui comporte des damnés aussi bien que des anges et des élus" (Bréhier, 1994, 306. My translation).

34 Brunschwig 1969, 9–10 (my translation).

ing which Batman, whose faith in humanity is also ambivalent, blocks the plans of his nihilistic alter ego before giving this strange reply, inspired by Nietzsche, a philosopher much referred to in popular culture: "We both looked into the abyss. But when the abyss looked back, you blinked[35]."

This curious reference to the famous aphorism 146 of *Beyond Good and Evil* raises a question: Did the Batman character, this creature of the night, perfectly understand the essence of evil, which allowed him not to surrender to it blindly? The mistake committed by the Owlman character, the act of blinking, calls to mind the prophets – Saint Paul, for example,– who were blinded and covered their eyes when confronted with a divine vision. The suggestion for Batman is of a total surrender to the forces of the abyss – identified as a divine power – and the obliteration of any trace of free will, a disease that, according to the Owlman's initial observation, gives only an illusion of freedom.[36]

The Leibnizian solution was never convincing. During the eighteenth century, and even before Voltaire's caricature of Leibniz in Pangloss in *Candide*, David Hume suggested that the world had been created by a novice god, in a half-accomplished first attempt. On the same note, and in the context of the twentieth century's pessimism and metaphysical scepticism, the existence of parallel worlds in the DC Universe can only lead to an inversion of Leibniz's plea. Yet does recognizing Leibniz's argument nullify those heroic figures' *raison d'être* and necessity? If this world is the best of all possible worlds, why bother with superheroes? These protagonists are stuck in an infinite vicious circle, where their heroic actions (fighting against the forces of evil) are incompatible with their identity (forces of evil define them as heroic protagonists). But, in a paradoxical manner, it is less a question of compatibility than of complementarity, with the hero's actions stimulated by antagonistic forces, indefinitely generating new actions.

CONCLUSION

The question of evil, and its endless ramifications, enables the semantic elements and syntax of the superhero genre to mature and be renewed. Some of the more obvious signs of syntactic renewal are the efforts of the superhero genre to raise awareness, through its own means, of contemporary socio-political issues. It also addresses an audience that is no longer limited to teenagers,

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35 Justice League: Crisis on Two Earths (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2010).

36 The choice of an owl as the symbol of Batman's diabolical alter ego is interesting. Both owl and bat are creatures of the night, but in many cultures the owl symbolizes loneliness, melancholy, and forces of darkness, unlike the bat, whose representations suggest a more dualist symbolism: though seen as a failed bird, or a monstrous being whose spiritual evolution was interrupted, in Greek mythology the bat refers to an intermediary state of progress, of maturation. See Chevalier/Gheerbrant 1982, 252–254.

with more adults interested in comics and their adaptations. In addition, the influence of dystopian literature on the development of the superhero genre has become more palpable over the years.

This renewal is thought unfortunate by observers who consider the genre's loss of innocence and its desire to be taken seriously a step backwards, deeming that its authors are ignoring the silliness that is integral to the genre – and where is the pleasure when a genre tries to be serious when it is not supposed to be? In addition, over the last thirty years, although the study of comics has gained a certain cultural legitimation, some researchers, especially in Europe, still find it difficult to see analysis of the comic as a cultural practice worthy of theoretical approaches and academic emancipation as are cinema and television.[37]

Furthermore, the close relationship between academic research and fandom, a characteristic feature of the study of comics in the United States, is not always well received by mainstream academics.[38] The extreme popularity of the media and its heavy reliance on the fans' imperatives and needs seem to undermine its hopes for cultural legitimacy. However, the renewal of the genre, especially via film, another popular medium, is a positive sign for those who can identify the superhero genre's ability to build a political and philosophical discourse that is in line with today's angst.

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37 There are some notable exceptions in the French-speaking academic world, such as the studies of Hergé's *Les aventures de Tintin*, a cultural phenomenon in its own right.

38 See Baetens 2005, 4–5.

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