

Ontogenetic machines: the transindividuation of American Superhero Comics

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Abstract

As Marvel Comics resumed the publication of Neil Gaiman and Mark Buckingham's *Miracleman: The Silver Age* in the spring of 2023, it marked only the latest phase in the ongoing transindividuation of a vastly distributed biotechnical organism dating back to the very inception of the American Superhero Comics industry. Tracing its roots to *Captain Marvel* – arguably the most successful emulation of *Superman* of the early 1940s – *Miracleman* emerges as a process of distributed labor involving generations of socio-technical and bio-cultural assemblages. Rebooted as *Marvelman* by the British comics industry in 1954, the title was again rebooted by Alan Moore and the DIY-aesthetics of the British anthology magazine *Warrior* in 1982, before returning to American publication at Eclipse Comics as *Miracleman* in 1985. Forming an important impetus to the so-called British invasion of the American comics industry in the 1980s, Moore's – and from 1990 Gaiman's – *Miracleman* evinces all the characteristics of revisionary and deconstructive superhero comics, being blatantly metafictional and self-referential. However, rather than as the outcome of an individual, authorial act of creation – that of Alan Moore's or Neil Gaiman's for example – I argue that *Miracleman* emerges as a cascade of feedback loops, generating while at the same time being generated by the cybernetic processes of the Superhero comics system. Using posthumanist media ecology (Bryant 2016, Fuller 2005), algorithmic criticism (Ramsay 2010) and Gilbert Simondon's concept of transindividuation (Simondon 2020), this paper shows how the production of comics – and superhero comics in particular – can be framed as a cybernetic process of co-creation, involving the structural coupling of different ontological domains and orders: technical, social, legal, cultural, biological. Structurally, as well as thematically, *Miracleman* emerges as an ontogenetic machine.

Keywords

Comics, machine learning, media ecology

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Bio

Per Israelson is an associate professor in media and communication studies at Linnaeus University. Israelson's work centers on media ecology and participatory culture. In his dissertation, *Ecologies of the Imagination* (2017), Israelson presented a posthumanist theory of the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic. His postdoc project investigated Swedish postdigital comics. He has written extensively on comics, genres of the fantastic and children's literature, both as critic and researcher.