

It's a Bird, it's a Plane, it's a Product: The Politics of 'Beginning' and the Narrative of the First Superman Cover

Arjyarishi Paul,

Assistant professor,

Basic Sciences & Humanities,

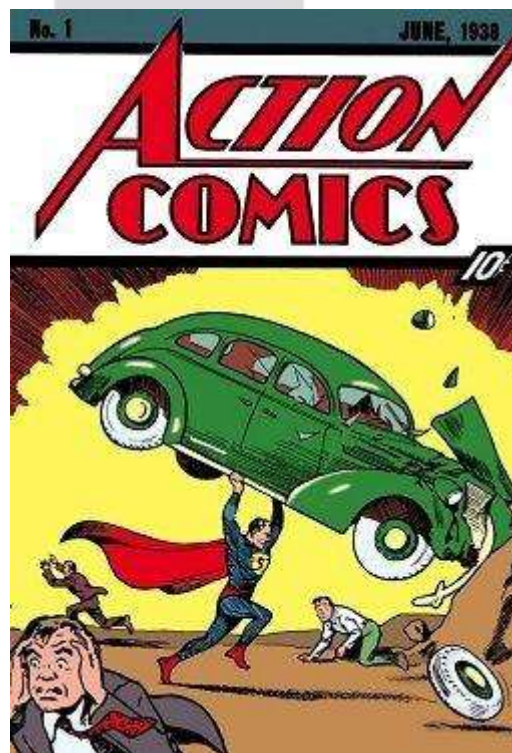
Meghnad Saha Institute of Technology

paularjyalogan@gmail.com

Abstract— The instantly recognizable cover of *Action Comics#1* had a costumed male hammering a commonplace vehicle against a boulder for seemingly no reason. On closer introspection though, there lurks a stronger, symbolic substance behind this iconic imagery

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Created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, the now iconic character Superman did not experience an easy breakthrough in print media. As early as in January 1933, Siegel launched a fictional monthly known as *The Advance Guard of Future Civilization*. He penned and published a short story titled 'The Reign of the Superman' in his magazine, where the protagonist Bill Dunn was designed as an anti-hero who falls prey to lust and consuming an arcane drug, acquires powers of telepathy and clairvoyance. The effort tanked and soon after, so did the magazine. Following a failed collaboration with The Consolidated Book Syndicate, Chicago to introduce a similar character in the comic strip *Detective Dan: Secret Operative* in 1935, the duo found themselves in repeated floundering or at the most, short-lived enterprises with National Allied Publishers, Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson and the like, till 1937. After a period of consistent rejection, it was finally, in April 1938, that an overtly masculine figure in tights, with an 'S' on his chest and a maroon cape, stormed his way into popular imagination through the covers of an upcoming anthology booklet, *Action Comics*. This paper aims to peel off the layers of that quintessential first front-cover and investigate the motivation behind the art, and consecutively, its effect on the early Twentieth-century American society.



This striking and instantly recognizable cover of *Action Comics#1* is an image that has spawned countless homages and parodies in the last eighty-plus years, since it was first published, apart from even appearing on toy-packaging and other

Superman merchandise. But, as the visual introduction to the most familiar superhero in the world, this cover didn't do a whole lot to make it clear that Superman was even meant to be the hero. The men running away from this scene look like terrified, unarmed civilians fleeing a bizarrely colourful menace whose presence is announced by a fiery aura of explosive energy; with the context inside the comic, however. To mention a tiny bit of it, Lois Lane, the love interest of Superman's timid alter-ego Clark Kent, is being kidnapped by a bunch of thugs; Kent sheds his disguise, chases after the speeding criminals, lifts the car effortlessly into the air and carelessly shakes everyone out. And then, he hammers the locomotive against a boulder for seemingly no reason. A dramatic, triumphant moment showcasing Superman's strength, the scene did little else. But then, back in his early stories, The Man of Steel was all about tormenting villains, so destroying a car in an exaggerated show of force just to make a statement, isn't really out of character for an early Superman. On closer introspection though, there lurks a stronger, symbolic substance behind this iconic imagery.

"The superhero is - and has always been - a response to the rapid, dizzying forces of early Twentieth-century modernism. The first few decades of the Twentieth-century were marked in America by rapid industrial growth, a shift from rural to urban life, and worldwide war. At a time when basic human functions - labour, manual production, even running and walking - were becoming redundant and obsolete, superheroes were a refreshing assertion of organic, physical accomplishment", says Alex Boney in *Superheroes and the Modern(ist) Age*, 2011. Literary critic Umberto Eco wrote about a similar approach in his essay 'The Myth of Superman' in 1972, elucidating on superheroes combating the spread of dehumanizing industrialization.

Curiously enough, Superman initially started off not as a hero fighting back against modern machines, but as a personification of dangerous technological advancements; Siegel and Shuster's earliest take on the character in 'The Reign of the Superman' in 1933, featured a power-crazed 'super' man who ends up going on a killing spree. But of course, they kept tweaking their creation until we got, "It's a bird, it's a plane - it's Superman!" - the classic introductory aphorism from the 1940 WOR radio-programme that established Superman as a being superior to anything our technology could throw at him. And this idea was reflected in the opening pages of nearly every early Superman comic. The Kryptonian would constantly display his pre-eminence over machines, with a special emphasis on blowing up vehicles, or smashing them or, simply outracing them.



This brings us all the way back to the cover of *Action Comics#1*, the seminal comic that introduces Superman to the world, as he lifts an automobile - an emblem of America's industrial innovation - and pulverizes it against a rock. It should be remembered that Superman lives in Metropolis, a pretty on-the-nose archetype of a big, bustling, technologically advanced city and yet he still found a rock, to hit a car against - like a caveman. This, definitely, is purposeful imagery. Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies* (1957), proposes that myth is a "second-order semiological system" — a form of speech that transforms history into nature. Superman, particularly in the context of his first appearance, becomes precisely that: an image of that "mythical speech" for American power, cloaked in the language of rescue and virtue. The irony, however, is that while Superman begins as a liberator — tearing down machines of greed — he is simultaneously packaged as the ultimate *product*. His muscle-bound frame, his logo, his moral absolutism, all contribute to a commodified narrative sold to the American public. Like the French wine and detergent Barthes examines, Superman is hollowed of complexity and filled with ideological nutrition. His rebellion is sanitized and mass-marketed. His anti-machine gesture (smashing the car) is thus transformed into its own spectacle, absorbed into the unstoppable techno-capitalist system it ostensibly critiques — a pastiche of resistance, but ultimately one that never escapes the logic of the marketplace.

It was the late Nineteen Thirties. Industrial assembly lines had continued to grow more concerned with profits than people, building machinery that weighs out humanity, making workers miserable or unnecessary, altogether. These were struggles and anxieties that were masterfully expressed in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Everything at the factory, in the film, is being automated to optimize production speed; even at, or perhaps, *especially* at the cost of the actual workers. Even lunch-breaks are considered inefficient; so, they bring in an 'eating machine', in an attempt to further recuperate the workplace,

while stripping away more and more of the workers' humanity, until they effectively *become* machines themselves. They would hit the same, repetitive tasks for long hours, every day, in the industrial manufacturing system, that was made popular at that time, by the commercialization of one 'revolutionary' product- the automobile. Brian Cremins in *Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia* (2016), describes "... the automobile, specifically, as a harbinger of a sometimes ominous, inhuman future in American literature, published in the first quarter of the Twentieth century." F. Scott Fitzgerald's horrific symbolism that he created in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), as the character of Myrtle is brutally mangled by Gatsby's gaudy yellow car, is an immediate echo. In Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918), there's the pertinent exchange at an evening dinner, adequately adapted into a poignant scene from its 1942 film version by Orson Welles:

"George- I said automobiles are a useless nuisance; never amount to anything but a nuisance.

They had no business to be invented.

Uncle Jack- Of course, you forget Mr. Morgan makes them. Also did his share in inventing them.

If you weren't so thoughtless, he might think you're rather offensive.

Eugene- I'm not sure George is wrong about automobiles. With all their speed forward, they may be a step backward in civilization. It may be that they won't add to the beauty of the world or the life of men's souls. I'm not sure. But automobiles have come. And almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring. They're gonna alter war and they're gonna alter peace. And I think men's minds are going to be changed because of automobiles. And it may be that George is right. It may be that in ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn't be able to defend the gasoline engine but would have to agree with George; that, automobiles had no business to be invented."

It's therefore difficult to overstate just how much cars have changed modern life. Swedish artist Carl Frederik Hill, in one of his paintings had shown just how little space in a typical new-age city is dedicated to pedestrians, versus the sprawling chasms of space consecrated to automobiles. The sheer absence of the roads unearths a shocking spectacle that is usually veiled from our naked eyes.



So, when Superman takes an object synonymous with the callous American manufacturing processes, and the growing forebodings of technological novelties threatening to change society in immeasurable ways, and then hits it against a *rock*, that does signify something. To reverberate Grant Morrison from his non-fiction *Supergods* (2011), this act by Superman communicates that he is a hero of the people; a bold, humanist response to the 'depression era' of fears, of runaway scientific leaps and soulless industrialism. Superman's obliteration of the car on the cover of *Action Comics #1* may be interpreted as a symbolic rupture in the mechanized rhythms of Fordism — that industrial doctrine which viewed man as an appendage to the machine. The car here functions as the quintessential product of Fordist logic: mass-produced, standardized, and divorced from artisanal identity. When Superman hurls it against a boulder — a prehistoric, non-industrial object — he metaphorically halts the mechanized march of modernity. This act becomes, in semiotic terms, a "thunderclap" of rebellion. One might even read it through the lens of Walter Benjamin's concept of the "shock" in modern life — the dissonance between experience (*Erfahrung*) and mere exposure (*Erlebnis*). Superman's action is not just heroic theatre, but a visual dissent against the erosion of lived human experience in industrial capitalism. Like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), where the worker's soul is crushed under mechanized cathedrals, *Action Comics #1* inaugurates its mythos with a violent exorcism — a symbolic smashing of the industrial system that devours the individual. Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodernism in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) helps us situate Superman within the contradictory swirl of cultural pastiche. For Jameson, postmodern culture lacks genuine historicity and instead thrives on imitation — the endless recycling of styles, stripped of depth. Superman, from his very inception, carries this duality. He is both a reification of the rural "good ol' boy" and the ultra-modern super-being; both populist saviour and authoritarian overlord. His image is repeated across time, from comic book covers to cereal boxes, morphing into a nostalgic emblem detached from its original political context. The *Action Comics #1* cover, then, becomes a site of aesthetic

schizophrenia — a fusion of anti-industrial rage and commercial sheen, of symbolic resistance and capitalist complicity. Superman's body, like all pastiche icons, is not historical but hyperreal — his muscles do not remember labour, only its simulation.

If we look into Superman's fictional character-biography, his home planet Krypton, was a thriving technological civilization that got too ambitious, and in the process, destroyed itself. Baby Kal-El was sent off to Earth, where he crash-landed in the heart of rural America, to be raised by modest, plebeian farmers as Clarke Kent. And that's exactly what makes Superman an embodiment of intrigue; he is a mid-Western farm-boy from Smallville but he's also that alien from an advanced community and again, a reporter in the hectic city of Metropolis. He's simultaneously rustic and worldly - and otherworldly! The big, blue boy-scout yet the man of tomorrow, there's an inherent duality built into the character of Superman and the image on the front-cover of *Action Comics#1* helps establish these apparently conflicting ideas so innately organic to Superman - and America, as a whole. Though there have been interpretations of The Man of Steel that have him renouncing his American citizenship and subsequently becoming a citizen of the world, the classic tagline almost everybody can recite from heart, is- "Superman fights for truth, justice and the American way." And much like Superman, at the crux of The American Way, lies two very diverse, rivalling concepts, of what America is and what its role in the world should be.

Going back to the timeline of the foundation of the nation, we find ourselves a notch further into unraveling the complex socio-political discourse beneath the first front-cover of Superman. In its days of late-infancy, the president of America was George Washington and many of the shapers of the country had different ideas about what the young nation could potentially become; and these competing opinions coalesced into roughly two major schools of thought, in early American politics. First up, were the Federalists, who believed that a united country with its robust manufacturing sector, a strategic distance from Europe and vast stretches of land to 'expand into', constituted the bedrock of a prosperous and progressive civilization. This line of thinking continued to resonate with a lot of then-modern, urban trade and administrative centres and with those who viewed America as a land of big and accomplished business — a proverbial world leader. Many of the ideas the Federalists proposed, were documented in the not-so creatively titled *The Federalist Papers: A Collection of Essays* (1787). It was a collection of eighty-five articles written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay under the pseudonym "Publius" to promote the ratification of the United States Constitution. However, not everyone was on the same page with Hamilton and the Federalists; and this rival but evidently uninspired group called themselves, the Anti-Federalists. The intellectual head of this movement was the founding father and the eventual third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. He had imagined an alternative America, the one he called an *agrarian republic*. Instead of trying to be a bigshot on the global stage, Jefferson held that America should be as loose and decentralized as possible, with every citizen free to possess his own plot of cultivable land, and live self-sufficiently off it. This idea of the nation where people lead their simple lives dependent on no one, is also very much at the core of the 'American identity'. And this tension between these two American ideals is intrinsic to the bricks underlying the pillar of the American Way, that Superman supposedly fights for. America, the superpower of innovators, at the forefront of technology but all at once, is essentially the habitat of "the good ol' farm-boys". Superman, as we can hence conclude, embodies these ostensibly antithetical ideals in one figure. He is an immigrant; and a simple, square-jawed man from Kansas. He's the recluse from the farmyard in the overpopulated city; but he's also the mighty, the amiable, ever-reliable go-to man who people look up to in danger. He's influential to so many as the saviour, but he secludes himself in the fortress of solitude. In other words, he's the swanky, shining new automobile; and yet, the inglorious, humble hunk of land. Conclusively, Superman is America- contradictions *et al.*

Interestingly, Siegel and Shuster were both Jews. Germany was spearheading the industrial boom and the race for armaments in contemporary Europe. Henry Ford sold tanks to the Nazis and George W. Bush's grandfather Prescott Bush sold oil to the Nazis to run those tanks. So, Siegel and Shuster might have essentially cast Superman in the mould of the Golem (the Jewish demi-God — the mythic protector built of clay) of Jewish folklore — an unkillable, titanic creature, brought to life by the Hebrew word *Emet* imprinted on his forehead (as the single curly, strand of hair) — a word that means, the Truth. This insight and the allusion of the Hebrew glyph inscribed on the Golem's forehead being recast into Superman's hair directs to a latent layer of diasporic anxiety and spiritual yearning for protection that the Siegel & Shuster duo might have harboured during the Nazi rise. That being said, the influences were never made conspicuous. When readers witnessed the now-exemplary image on the newsstands back in 1938, maybe, they merely saw a colourful, exciting illustration exploding with action and intrigue. Or perhaps, they sensed it a bit closer; and perceived something that resonated with them, a little deeper — something that tapped into their jitters, their scruples — about how the world could be, and how it *should* be. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition* (1958), introduces the notion of *natality* — the capacity for new beginnings as the foundation of political action. Superman, in his very origin, is an allegory of natality. He is the child of a dying world; he crash-landed in a new one, not to dominate but to begin again. The first image of him on the cover — a figure of furious energy amidst civilian chaos — visually mirrors the terror and possibility of beginnings. In smashing the car, Superman may also be smashing the determinism of linear progress — the car being the engine of a past-industrial logic. He begins, instead, a myth of the neo-human: neither bird nor plane, but something that follows them — a future species, a post-industrial ideal. The famous tagline — "It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!" — can be re-read as a symbolic chronology: nature (bird), machine (plane), and then, the *unprecedented*. Superman is not a continuation of the technological man, but an Arendtian rupture — a superhuman as metaphor for the eternal possibility of rebirth, of an altruistic, ethical re-imagination. And amidst all the facsimile of suggestions, quietly taking center-stage, was this astonishing mystique of a character, dressed in blue overalls and a maroon cape, whose creators had not the slightest idea how much they

were about to change the world. An introspection on his origin beautifully frames Superman as a moral contradiction — a saviour who smashes industrial greed (the car), but is himself the product of hyper-industrialized storytelling (the comic-book). And accordingly, everything spirals back to this front-cover - the one that started it all - *Action Comics#1*.

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