INCORPORATING FLOW FOR A COMIC [BOOK] CORRECTIVE OF RHETCON

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In this essay, I examined the significance of graphic novels as polyvalent texts that hold the potential for creating an aesthetic sense of flow for readers and consumers. In building a justification for the rhetorical examination of comic book culture, I looked at Kenneth Burke’s critique of art under capitalism in order to explore the dimensions between comic book creation, distribution, consumption, and reaction from fandom. I also examined Victor Turner’s theoretical scope of flow, as an aesthetic related to ritual, communitas, and the liminoid. I analyzed the graphic novels *Green Lantern: Rebirth* and *Y: The Last Man* as case studies toward the rhetorical significance of retroactive continuity and the somatic potential of comic books to serve as equipment for living. These conclusions lay groundwork for multiple directions of future research.
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CHAPTER 1
THE POP RHETORIC OF FLOW IN COMIC BOOK CULTURE AND THE BURKEAN
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Introduction to the Rhetorical Problem

On August 31, 2009 Disney, the House that Walt built, acquired Marvel Entertainment, the House that Stan built, for $4 billion, in what would stand as the largest single merger of the fiscal year (Nakashima, 2009). No stranger to acquisition, the Mouse House has generated an unrivaled reputation for enveloping companies into their fold in an effort to stabilize market shares and balance their consumer demographics. With the purchase of big-four network ABC in 1995, Pixar studios in 2006, and Marvel in 2009, Disney is poised to position itself among the elite worldwide corporate giants. The corporate culture of buy-and-sell is synonymous with big business, and perhaps with each new merger, the public sphere grows callused to the tendencies and tactics of would be monopolies. The Disney/Marvel merger reveals a staunch public anxiety toward the fate of fictitious heroes that fly under the guise of properties in media text.

The public anxiety of the potential monopolization, reflected in the Disney/Marvel merger was immediately evident. Reader response to the Marvel acquisition on USA Today’s website rendered a portrait of the love/hate relationship with corporate-consumer America. The username American37 reacted sarcastically: “No!!! The last thing comics need is Tweenage Superhookers and Wimpy little boys,” while crazemastercraze lamented, “you gotta be kidding!?! today's disney ruins everything they touch. so long content, hello to easiest way to make money. end of an era. R.I.P Marvel...” (USA Today, 2009). Nick from KS discussed a fear of the merging of narrative morals: “I'm having a hard time seeing how Disney is going to promote Marvel. If you've read any Marvel comics lately, you see that the 'heroes' are doing drugs, sleeping around, beating their wives, betraying their friends, making deals with Satan, etc.
Not really 'Magic Kingdom' material" (USAToday, 2009). This paralyzing fear of the potential whitewashing of Marvel became a consistent theme among reactors. Stark International exploded, “OVEREXPOSURE Forthcoming! …No more rated R Marvel features either!” (Superherohype.com, 2009). The sentiment-come-horroric reaction often met with humor in the form of Disney/Marvel team-up puns. While a fair representation of hopeful individuals stabilized the riotous bloggers with attitudes and words of trust toward Disney's [feared] creative tampering, the immediate anxiety propelled itself to the walls of cyberspace with a THWACK! And a SPLAT!

Analysis of this news story unearths a deeper anxiety in the public consciousness, as to the intersection of art under capitalism. Kenneth Burke, writing in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, responded that, “’Pure’ art is safest only when the underlying moral system is sound” (Burke, 1941, p. 321). When a moral system is compromised in the name of say, profit, the participants of the system must either conform/accept to or reject the new system. However, the foundations of art of based upon the originality and creativity of the individual, not the system. Burke (1968) maintained, “Changes in art occur concomitantly with changes in political and economic conditions; therefore the changes in art are caused by the changes in political and economic conditions” (Burke, 1968, p. 80). The public sphere, whether regarded by artists as fans or by corporations as consumers, operates under the guise of capitalism through their individual and/or collective aesthetic interests. Burke (1968) denoted that “all competent art is a means of communication,” (Burke, p. 73) and if the public invests revenues in the interest of $800 million to $1 billion annually toward comic books and related materials, the communication message is clear that these properties of pop art are vitally important to the social makeup of many Americans. Further, it appears the link between consumer ownership and
commodity ownership represents a cultural tension interwoven between economics, art, leisure, and Western culture.

As Newsarama broke the merger story, screen name user Martel retorted, “After the Mouse killed The Middleman, I’m somewhat concerned” (Update #3, n.d.). Without exception, during a year in which political footballs were made out of hot-button words like recession, socialism, and the highest unemployment numbers in decades, the monolithic shadows of [evil] corporations distill over the landscape of [heroic] consumers in a vision akin to David and Goliath. As evidence demonstrated, comics fans, creators, and retailers have anxieties about Disney’s corporate influence over their characters and other creative content, as marketing decisions often invoke a synergistic quality between company properties. Readers/consumers desire unhampered artistic visions, outside of the ordinary, to sweep away anxiety and offer momentary peace through narrative flow enacted by a growing public fascination with comic book-related materials. Eco (1978) acknowledged the tension is between when commodities form [i.e., the creation of an iconic character like Batman] and the storytellers and audiences that want to do something new with it. With this current drama unfolding within the nexus of art, capitalism, and public culture, the crucial yet unaddressed questions inquire the following: First, how can we examine the ongoing tensions between fan/consumer interest and the motivations of corporate production? Second, what does the production and consumption of comic commodities look like at a case-by-case level? Third, how can we examine the ongoing tensions between art and commodity through the lens of the comic book genre as a medium of analysis?

Goals of this Project

The goal for this thesis is to trace the methods of orchestration as related to flow in
popular culture. In this project, I explore the intersections of art and capitalism, as these ideas designate conflicting rhetorical functions as/of commodity and artistic creativity. I juxtapose the successful employment of a flow aesthetic in both mainstream serial comic books distributed by top two company DC Comics, as well as creator-owned graphic novels that operate under alternative modes of production. Accessing flow requires liminoid participation concerning multi-faceted narratives with the complex inter-dynamics caused by rules of commodity capitalism in corporately owned comic book properties. The term flow, briefly introduced below, will enlist the performative definitions outlined by Victor Turner in *The Anthropology of Performance* and *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1988, 1982). In performance studies, flow is theoretically linked to both ritual and play. Schechner (2002) regarded play as “difficult to pin down or define,” in that it can be found both in and out of structure, in formal or informal situations, and among adults children, etc. (Schechner, 2002, p. 89). Flow, on the other hand, operates as, “the feeling of losing oneself in the action so that all awareness of anything other than performing the action disappears” (Schechner, p. 97).

The related definition serves this project’s intent of establishing the lineage of flow as a method, marking as success and failure within the system of capitalism and narrative piety. For Turner, ritual and play represent modes of performance through which flow might be achieved. Along this ritual-to-play spectrum, I chart how flow functions as an aesthetic tool sought by consumers, wherein the dangers of breaking flow threatens to release public anxiety and consumer dissatisfaction among fandom. Extrapolating this data set requires separating case studies into flow. The two case studies juxtapose the tension of maintaining flow: first, within the serial nature of superhero comic books surrounding the character Green Lantern, and second, via examination of a specific limited series, *Y: The Last Man* (2002). Tracking flow as a sought
after aesthetic highlights Burke’s critique of art under capitalism as well as theorize the polyvalent potential in narrative sequential storytelling to function as equipment for living. Likewise, the Burkean terminology employed assists an understanding of Turner’s theoretical work at play in comic culture.

Justification of Analysis

The justification of this project surfaces as the debate for positioning art under capitalism evolves into blurred tension of high art to low art, publication versus distribution, and individual freedom competing with corporate strategies of form that create instant money, while providing watered-down visions lacking uniqueness. These tensions within the comic book community have created a comic culture that exists on a level more akin to the symbiotic relationship of the birds that ride on the backs of hippos. Alternatively, perhaps more appropriately, the remora fish that attach themselves to the backs of sharks (Clancy et al., 2006). A rhetorical analysis of flow is warranted here because such analysis offers a closer look into the symbiotic relationships between reader/consumers and creators/corporations. Insight into this field of expertise could reveal the pitfalls and payoffs of investing money in a process that yields no guaranteed returns other than the potential for somatic flow, in the sense of escapism/coping against present societal antagonisms. The case study on narrative stylistic devices and execution of flow tactics could also lend knowledge to the rhetorical responses by way of immediate cyber feedback from reader/consumers. Thus, reader/consumer participation occurs via selection or choice, signaling the association of flow within the liminoid.
Objectives

One objective to this project is the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the rhetorical play between what corporate America produces in the name of profit versus what consumer America expects in return for their investment. Examining popular genre culture for its rhetorical texture in addition to its aesthetic form can reveal greater truths about consumerism. Second, employing flow as an aesthetic identification and as a method to explore these cultural facets affords a unique blending of cross-communicative methods in the name of furthering what communication studies can render. Finally, the epistemological objective I seek to further examine public or audience anxiety over fantasy elements. Specifically, I want to explore why or how artistic aesthetics [and in this argument, flow] are pivotal in comic book culture as a literary form of equipment for living, as fans navigate and resist tensions interment for comics’ dual status as commodity and art/literature. I argue that the aesthetic nature of flow functions as a kind of medicine or soma for readers, which reveals how Burke enriches Turner if soma can be medicinal equipment for living. Second, I demonstrate how Turner’s concept of flow answers the problematic of Burke’s viewpoint of art under capitalism, while Burke’s working knowledge of form offers specificity to enrich Turner’s vague conceptualization of flow.

Theoretical Implications

Comics’ Ideological Weight and a Preview of Burke and Turner

Graphic novels and their direct lineage from comic books have become a critical cultural entrée to academia in recent years. McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon (2001) testified to the ideological functions within comics, and established comics’ social significance in modern cultural history where, “the ritual nature of reading the comic-strip page of the newspaper [by
adults and children] can make the form a key part of the morning routine” (McAllister et al., 2001, p. 4). McAllister et al.’s words tease a bevy of theoretical implications. The invocation of ritual embarks toward Turner’s work on the ritual nature of shared *communitas* and thus deeper enlightenments toward the potential nature of flow. Fisher (1999) averred that, “humans are essentially storytellers…[and] the world is a set of stories, which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation” (as cited in Lucaites et al., 1999, p. 272). In addition, McAllister’s attention to the importance of form induces Kenneth Burke’s pronouncement of rhetorical form. Burke defined form “as ‘an arousing and fulfillment of desires’ or ‘the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite’” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2002, p. 195). The invocation of Burke and Turner is not of particular coincidence, as I argue their works are central to defining and answering Burke’s charge against the positioning of art under capitalism. First, I take a brief introductory look at specific arguments enacted by Burke, followed by Turner’s performative views of flow, and a return to the historicities of comic books and comic book literature.

Kenneth Burke has become situated as a key influential theorist in transitioning the operational mindset of communication studies scholars. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1973), Burke established a general procedure for describing his chief argument in the chapter, “The Nature of Art under Capitalism.” In his argument, Burke (1973) asserted:

(a) Some basic considerations as to the relation between work and ethics are offered; (b) the attempt is made to show that this integral relationship between work and ethics is violated under capitalism; (c) by reference to the psychology of art, and to the connection between art and ethics, indigenous to capitalistic enterprise, requires a “corrective” kind of literature. (p. 314)

The above premise establishes a noteworthy distrust for the systematized nature of a post-industrialist, late capitalist/free enterprise society. Burke viewed the creative force of art and
literature as uniquely capable of resisting and disrupting the occupational psychosis of capitalism. Burke’s premise is noble if not difficult in a systematized postmodern age. However, to properly achieve these particular expectations of pure art in modern Western culture might prescribe a manifesto akin to Ted Kaczynski. Consequently, improbability resides and Burke’s bohemian argument can be buried forever unless his opportunity of a corrective can be reinterpreted or re-imagined in a way that celebrates intellectuality and the exposure of art abusing publics in the name of capital. Burke (1973) avowed that, “‘pure’ art is safest only when the underlying moral system is sound” (p. 321). While no system can be completely proven honorable or morally sound, I argue that the expansion of theoretical literacy in the vain hopes of educating publics toward a comic [book] corrective might substitute an ethical morality. Burke’s rhetorical hope in a comic corrective, animated by a perspective by incongruity that defies the commodifications of capitalism, may suggest a subtle comic book corrective at work in the narrative flow of comics storytelling, fandom, and consumer culture. Thus, in an effort to provide a morality to the magistrations of the comic book publishing industry, I argue for an interpretation of a comic code of capital and unwind the strings that separate (post)modern art from capitalism.

Interpreting comic book capitalism under Burkean dramatism hastens an unveiling analogous to a bourgeois magic trick. Revelatory performance then requires the aid of a trained professional to distract the audience while the magician establishes the props used to suspend imagination. Thus, Burke’s critical interventionism, or word magic, needs to be enriched with Turner’s performative participation in order to explore a critical aesthetic for ritual dramas. Performance scholar Victor Turner appropriately subsists as the ideal embodiment for the transformation of Burke’s inquisition for modern audiences.
Turner gained renown through his anthropological work studying/exposing the social drama of the Ndembu people and the organizational structures of cultural performance (Carlson, 2004). In his seminal books *The Anthropology of Performance* (1988) and *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), Turner rendered the communicative ritual experiences of communitas and flow. “Communitas exists in a kind of ‘figure-ground’ relationship with social structure” (Turner, 1982, p. 50). Communitas tends to be inclusive but can also be generous or spark growth from *spontaneous communitas*. Communitas is significant from a communicative social standpoint, and prescribes a way of spotting and interpreting shared fellowship in unique cultural circumstances. Communitas is not required to engage in flow but often enhances it, contributing a pivotal exterior position for structuralizing the deeper context of shared beliefs and practices in co-cultures.

While communitas executes a shared or external form of communication, flow operates on an internal plane. Turner (1988) avowed flow “is an interior state which can be described as the merging of action and awareness, the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement, a state in which action follows action according to an internal logic, with no apparent need for conscious intervention on our part” (p. 54). Flow then exists as a kind of rhythm of the mind and embodied aesthetic of participative play where logic abets distraction in order to secure full focus. Yet, the “merging of action and awareness” exceeds the mental to join with physical processes (Turner, p. 54). “Flow may be experienced…in play and sport, in artistic performance and religious ritual. Flow is made possible by a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field, by means of framing, bracketing, and usually a set of rules” (Turner, 1988, p. 54). The concept of framing is critical in dictating that flow transcends performance in the theatrical or cultural communicative. Flow is an aesthetic participation, not completely conscious
and critical as Burke might urge, but co-constitutive toward ritual participation in this project’s example of dramatizing narratives in graphic literature.

Flow is a mind/body action precipitating the event of peak interest or involvement for individuals. The greatest sports analogies derive from player descriptions like s/he’s in the zone or s/he’s on fire! These two slogans provide a context in which a singular individual separates her/himself from other combatants by way of a mental/physical demonstration of oneness and peek concentration. The result of which is spectacular play or performance. Uniquely in flow, “there is a loss of ego, the ‘self’ that normally acts as broker between ego and alter becomes irrelevant” (Turner, 1988, p. 54-55). Thus, the philosophy of the self or selfish is put aside by efforts to transcend self-monitoring ego.

Turner (1988) averred, “flow perhaps elicits or ‘seduces out’ the unconscious levels of the self” (Turner, 1988, p. 55). Thus, a person in the flow witnesses and participates in behavior and/or ritual that may not normally afford to her/his daily routine, whether physical or spiritual. Existing outside of normality and routine, flow then becomes a kind of goal or commodity once individuals recognize its significance. Perhaps individuals experience flow through different types of activities, such as sports, work, or even reading. To say that reading enacts a liminal flow experience for readers, I argue that readers attribute books to the embodiment of a flow experience. Therefore, the acquisition of flow-guising books becomes an unconscious shift to materialism in lieu of transcendence.

Furthermore, I hypothesize that the developmental commodity fetishism\(^1\) of comic books and/or graphic novels then addresses the crux of theoretical workings between Burke’s concerns over the nature of art under capitalism with Turner’s anthropologically performative framing of flow. Comics scholar Scott McCloud averred to the cognitive participation that comic book
reading evokes from audiences (McCloud, 1994). McCloud noted, “Comics act as an intermediary between storyteller and audience” (p. 172), which then requires the reader to participate in the storytelling function, to which the story may then trigger a flow-induced aesthetic. McCloud helps determine that although comics are often criticized as *escapist entertainment*, Turner may suggest this is a ritual participation immersed within the flow of graphic storytelling. Before the intersection of Burke/Turner can be crossed, critical examination of comic book history along with recent comic book scholarship will alleviate questions of importance while constituting the pieces needed to shape the theoretical argument I propose.

*Comics as a Premiere Cultural Social Space*

Revisiting McAllister et al.’s argument for ideological interest in comics, the advent of underground comics or *comix* represented a shifting opportunity for mainstream writers to pronounce biting social commentary within the confines of the once-viewed innocent, if not nonsensical, art form (McAllister et al., 2001). Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) unearthed this trend to the popular with his re-realized interpretation of the Nazi holocaust under the guise of a faux Disney cat-and-mouse fantasy point of view. Comic books experienced cultural shifts in maturity much in the vein of American culture, if not always on the same timeline. McAllister et al. (2001) noted feminist comix writers like Trina Robbins and Joyce Farmer authored works “dealing frankly with such issues as rape, abortion, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination” (McAllister et al., 2001, p. 9). While comix publications were subversive at best, such defiance led to an eventual erosion of power for the Comics Code Authority, the notorious self-imposed censorship of the comics industry that grew out of Frederick Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* movement of the 1940s (Wright, 2003). While the content revolution spanned
decades, the singular moment of achievement for the comic book industry may have come early in the 1990s amidst a sales renaissance, where new #1 issues were competing for sales in the millions and companies witnessed record profit.

Commercial success in the latter half of the 1980s led to a creative shuffle in the comic book industry as Marvel underwent new ownership and management, via Ron Perelman (Coville, n. d.). Perelman acted as a businessman living under a corporatized sense of operation. His role in the then-acquisition of Marvel revealed more interest in flipping the company for profit, via the late-80s speculator’s market. If hindsight precipitates any indication, Perelman’s tenure over Marvel represented both the best and worst of capitalism. During the late 80s, Marvel began what would to this day continue to be a trend of high concept story arcs that forced readers to buy numerous tie-ins or related comics in order to follow any one storyline (Coville, n. d.). Despite financial success, the period between the mid 80s to early 90s came to be known as “the gimmick age” of comics (Coville, n. d.). The gimmick reputation, as well as (un)creative business strategies, spread throughout the industry. Rhetorically, this period demonstrates tension out of balance between machinations of form for profit (capitalism) and creative control/expression (art). Fan backlash toward this era of comics history demonstrates how the speculation market disrupted flow, as perceptions of pure art in the medium deteriorated into pure commodity. Writer-artists were stifled from creative control altogether and took exception to the lack of compensation amid rapid commercial success, leading to one of the most significant industry shift in the genre’s history.

**The Rise of Image Comics and the Shifting Market**

In 1992, seven of the elite writer-artists in comics split from Marvel to establish a unique
creator-owner company, Image Comics (Casey, 2008). Image took its name from the co-founders’ allegorical intent toward visual storytelling (Casey, 2008); a foresight eventually leading to another unbalanced tension between artistic fortitude and narrative attentiveness. The so-called “Image age” signified a revolution where complaints about creative freedom, character rights, and editorial control were finally at long last swapped for complete control, creator-ownership, and updated quality control of artwork through new computerized standards and superior print advancements (Coville, n. d.). “Image itself would own no intellectual property beyond its name and logo, and no partner could interfere with another’s work, creatively or financially” (Casey, 2008, p. 64). The monumental strategy allotted for both artistic expression and equitable ownership. Spawn creator Todd McFarlane recounted, “You could sell a fraction…if I was selling four hundred, five hundred thousand of Spider-Man [a month at Marvel], we could have gone down to 60,000 [at Image] and made just as much, if not more, money” (Casey, p. 64). Image would battle difficulties of stability common among upstart businesses, but the creator ownership transition occurred toward writer-artist-driven decision-making and recognition within the industry. One of McFarlane’s successful avenues included establishing an original toy line modeling designs after his original artwork to cash in on the lucrative collectibles market in action figures. McFarlane’s self-establishment of merchandizing sparked an additional competitive enterprise within the industry that vies in contention with comic book readership, that being of commodity profitability.

Jeffrey A. Brown (1997) acknowledged that commodity can be a slippery slope as “comic book fandom [oscillates] as a complex system with its own rules for determining the worth and stature of popular texts” (Brown, 1997, p. 13). Distributor desire to maximize consumer awareness of the product creates a polarizing effect between niche interest and coveted
commodity. For example, the expansion-cum-saturation of Japanese manga alleviates a certain subversive milieu association within subgenre interest. In her case study of global manga commodity Sailormoon, Mary Grigsby (2004) accounted the touchy-feely nature of commodity saturation (Grigsby, 2004). Grigsby (2004) noted, “The global culture industry produces two primary features: cultural homogeneity (a culture marked by standardization, stereotype, and manipulated consumer goods…), and a limited horizon with goals that can be realized within the framework of consumer society” (Grigsby, 2004, p. 75-76). Thus, comics traditionally conform to hegemonic structures of capitalism despite the opportunities afforded to artistic creative expression in the medium.

To clarify Grigsby’s viewpoint, while smart money business is to continually expand consumer reach and public branding, the very niche nature of particular comic book properties to comic book readers validates their particular tastes. Brown (1997) vied that “collecting is an important marker of status within official [comic] culture…[Thus, to a further degree] elite collecting is based on an ability to discriminate and thus to acquire the exceptional rather than the common” (Brown, 1997, p. 23). Brown named comic commodity culture as a shadow economy of high and low taste (Brown, 1997). These elements combine with more modern media outlets like fan sites and online forums where instant feedback and criticism have combined to provide comic fandom with a sardonic overarching perception of skepticism and elitism toward products. It is within this landmine landscape of instant criticism and praise from both high and low end participants that industry giants like Marvel and DC Comics must constantly maneuver. However, long-range commodity viewpoints are becoming an increased goal of companies by way of comic-to-film adaptations. McAllister, Gordon, and Jancovich (2006) observed “increasingly, comic book companies see themselves in the character-licensing
business (at the very least) and perhaps even more specifically in the filmed entertainment industry” (McAllister et al., 2006, p. 111).

The constant expansion of character commodities, in addition to monthly comic book serials, thus posits an additional tension in the vast array of interpretations and re-imaginings of characters. Within the constraints of licensed characters like Batman or Superman, no one writer or artist stays associated to a particular character forever. Thus, a dilemma erupts in the form of a consistently shifting creative structurations of characters and their respective fantasy universes. Umberto Eco (1972) addressed this problematic of immobile time to the continuity of comic book universes, through singular examination of the Superman problem:

The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in the singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore, he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable… (p. 15)

Eco addressed a problematic viewpoint where superheroes seem to be both present and unending, which should conflict audience perception when reading various character interpretations. I posit the answer to Eco’s commentary coincides with the intersection of Burke’s problematic toward capitalism and Turner’s terminology of flow, resulting in a new rhetorical stratagem necessary for isolating and identifying the phenomenology that connects art and capitalism in a balanced tension within comic culture. Thus, continued exploration of these three communication theorists within the playground of comic books/graphic novels invites rhetorical attention and expansion.

Historian Paul Buhle noted, “Comics offer a running commentary, whether by artist intent or otherwise, on the look and feel of daily life” (Buhle, 2008). Thus, the exploration of Burlean epistemology amid Turner’s theoretical terminology in an effort to further Eco’s commentary on the nature of comic books establishes a cause for continuation of theoretical
application toward graphic novels. Mainstreaming academic comic book scholarship has become a tent pole interest among wider circles. For example, the National Communication Association announced a course-design entitled “Teaching the College Course in Comics and Graphic Storytelling” as the first of several key seminars to kickoff the 2009 NCA convention in Chicago (National Communication Association, 2009). The legitimization of comic scholarship, when accurately approached, allows continued expansion and exploration of communicative theories and rhetorical implications. Thus, I combine interpretation of the power of graphic novel storytelling and the advance of rhetorical theory as continual and utilitarian.

Chapter Previews

Chapter 1 introduced the problematic that exists between art and capitalism, teasing Burke’s art/capital critique, Turner’s flow, and the ideological turn in comic culture and comics scholarship. Chapter 2 begins with a historic perspective from the point and time and point of view of theorist and literary critic Kenneth Burke. Burke dissects a longstanding [and he argues irrefutable] conflict between these opposing forces throughout designated chapters of his published works, including Counter-Statement (1931), Permanence and Change (1935), and The Philosophy of Literary Form (1939). From his rhetorical perspective, I carve an ideological landscape of the inherent difficulties that are negotiated between art and capitalism. The goal of these perspectives is to illuminate a public anxiety created when art and capitalism fall out of balance. The rhetorical significance of the comic book fandom lies in its passion for instant community feedback and how that feedback symbiotically can affect corporate creative decisions, both for better and worse.

In chapter 2, I then introduce the concept of flow from a performance-based theoretical
standpoint. I explore Victor Turner’s specific definitions as related to flow from his stalwart publications *The Anthropology of Performance* (1988) and *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982). I set up the performance-based definitions of flow as the rhetorical motif of chapters 3 and 4. I extend the theoretical work begun in chapter 1 by exploring flow within the context of comic book circulation: first, within the domain of marketing strategies, and second, within a specific narrative case study. I provide a cultural context for the genre of the comic book medium. I establish many of the scholastic markers that propel this medium into a pillar of genre entertainment and all around Americana. Understanding comics and how they function as art is as critical as the analytic qualities of comic books. The significance of this free enterprise expansion is pivotal to comprehending the balance of art and capitalism in an effort to achieve symmetric flow in the comic book community.

In chapter 3, I examine flow from the perspective writer Geoff Johns’ narrative style in *Green Lantern: Rebirth*. I seek to explicate major occurrences when distributors sought to engage in a capital based flow from consumers, by striking at the narrative hearts of comic book readers through *event-based* comics that promise dramatic change the imaginary status quo of the respective DC and Marvel Universes [i.e., DCU and Marvel U]. While these marketing strategies are designed primarily for the interest of selling more books, emphasis on the historical lineage of Green Lantern and the structural narrative and fan support for *Rebirth* will evince the inherent tensions and/or symbiosis between the audience/consumer interests versus that from the producer/distributor interests, as navigated by the *Green Lantern* creative team at DC Comics.

While the function of flow is partly predicated in successful sales, the performative fluctuations and breakage of flow can be analyzed based on the reactions of fickle fandom to such *creative decisions*. Analysis of flow under the structures of capitalism can reveal the types
of risk/reward systems that produce a tension between art and capital. This socio-economic tug-o-war can be reduced to the micro level of individual writers as well as the greater companies at large. The argument begins at the broader corporate level of strategy and execution, and shifts into analysis of two writers’ rhetorical narrative strategies. Geoff Johns’ *Green Lantern: Rebirth* (2004-05) and Bryan K. Vaughan’s *Y: The Last Man* (2002-08) provide case studies in chapters 3 and 4. With these case studies, I extrapolate and inspect the role of flow as an organic rhetoric of symbiotic interests and audiences through the comic book medium.

To compliment the analysis of marketing strategies of superhero storytelling, in chapter 3 I propose what I maintain to be a rhetoric of Retcon, or a postmodern strategy for *retroactive continuity* storytelling that seeks to take the medium of serialized comic books to levels of greater maturity and commodification. I unpack the stratagem utilized by *Wizard* magazine’s 2004-2008 Fan Favorite [and I argue master rhetorician of Retcon] writer for DC Comics, Geoff Johns. Johns’ narrative work on the character Green Lantern serves as a case study demonstrating the rhetoric of Retcon, or Rhetcon, as a method of function toward the synthesis of superhero flow. Chapter 3 concludes with an inspection of the Green Lantern’s commodity culture established by the nature of comic book capitalism. Thus, the Rhetcon functions to direct superhero flow favorable to superhero fandom while also maintaining a profitable commodity. I then juxtapose chapter 3’s case study of superhero rhetoric against chapter 4, where the focus shifts to creator-owned, non-superhero material, which answers Burke’s concern of a comic [book] corrective kind of graphic literature, as equipment for living.

In chapter 4, I then synthesize a case study examining Eisner Award winning writer Bryan K. Vaughan’s adult-oriented graphic novel limited series *Y: The Last Man* (2008). I explicate how *Y* avoids the trappings of mass-capital saturation while emerging as a highly
successful and sought after book series. The goal is to present the case that Y operates as a facilitator of flow and soma in popular culture. Turner’s definition of flow works as a type of soma for readers, especially the traditional comic book base of white males. The somatic affect is furthermore kairotically linked to the post-9/11 climate in the United States. Thus, the flow administered through the books’ narratives works to aesthetically soothe and reflect the societal changes, including increases in feminine power, the rise of multiculturalism, and the decline of white male power. I conclude with an application of Benwell’s proposed New Sexism as a rhetorical link between communication theory and popular culture interest in the public sphere. The key inference of flow as somatic offers an addition to the link between the performative definition, the reverence of popular culture in America, and the basic medicinal desire for escapism.

Finally, in chapter 5, I evaluate the key implications of flow and the role it serves in art, capitalism, and popular culture. I string together the separate argument made in chapters 2, 3, and 4, in addition to the central Marvel-Mouse House incorporation presented in the introduction. I also offer a support or rejection of the disputes presented by key theorists like Burke as those disputes may or may not match the modern equation of art under capitalism. My hope is to demonstrate a rhetorical interest in the somatic occurrences associated with flow, and establish a method of predicting such factors. One method of function or prediction is what I term Rhetcon. A second theoretical extension introduces the concept of superhero flow, a rhetorical term specifically tailored to the fantasy genre. A third method may tie to an updated incorporation of the term soma in bridging the theoretical works of Burke and Turner, while examining the balance between the symbiotic relationship of editorial marketing decisions and fanboy feedback online in the comics community. I conclude with a selection of purposive
suggestions on future research pertaining to the comic book medium, and list the case-by-case
exceptions or exemptions to the results found.
In chapter 1, I established the lingering audience anxiety associated with corporate tampering toward creative expressions of art. This example exploits the artistic yet commoditized superheroes that have blossomed from comic book creations to universally recognized iconic properties. In recognizing the cultural power of these characters and stories, comics represent a genre of popular culture that bridges Turner’s anthropologic interests in cultural rituals and liminoid achievements of flow, and Burke’s critique that pure art cannot unproblematically exist under capitalism. I hypothesize Burke needs Turner to complete his critique to specifically theorize aesthetic identification. Conversely, Turner needs Burke’s perspective of capitalism to realize the cultural significance that aesthetics [and in this project comic book serialty] plays in modern Western capitalist ritualization. The crux of this study works toward bridging the works of Burke and Turner through employment of modern texts pivotal to ritual and commodity in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1 previewed the ongoing tensions between the artistic virtues of comic book culture and the capitalistic tendencies of corporate influence. The example of Disney’s 2009 acquisition of Marvel Entertainment highlighted a specific culture occurrence where culture and commerce collided, as demonstrated by the immediate audience anxieties captured by big-business ventures. Marvel fandom’s anxiety over a presumed Disneyfication of their beloved superheroes echoes the concerns of both Burke and Turner about the theoretical implications for our art, literature, and participative rituals under the profit motive of capitalism, indicating a shared concern for the commodification of creativity. In this chapter, my primary goal is to first
establish Burke’s long-held appreciation for the state of artistic creativity under capitalism, and to second examine the art/capitalism critiques Kenneth Burke sprinkled into his early works of *Counter-Statement* (1968), *Permanence and Change* (1984), and *The Philosophy of Literary Form* \(^2\) (1973). In addition, I identify three of Burke’s theoretical terms, in *occupational psychosis*, *trained incapacity*, and Burke’s *pollution-purification-redemption* cycle\(^3\) that will assist the unpacking of my larger arguments throughout the entirety of this project and further expound the *art/capital* tensions in comic book culture.

My second goal of this chapter concentrates toward summarizing the chief anthropological tracings of Victor Turner’s essay “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual…” included in Turner’s *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982). As with Burke’s *Philosophy*, my goal is to chiefly summarizing the text in an effort to extrapolate a clear lineage of *flow* and flow’s *liminoid* origin. The third focus of this chapter is to establish the role of comic books beyond a literary genre. Comprising the research of Matthew Putz’ *Comic Book Culture* (1999), Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1994), and Duncan and Smith’s *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (2009), I seek a final goal of establishing the narrative characteristics and conventions to the literary form\(^4\).

Burke’s essay “Psychology and Form”\(^5\) investigated that nature of form, and contended that when form aligns closer to good art, form endures and benefits from its own repetition (Burke, 1968). For example, this definition of form is comparable to popular songs or satisfying movie tropes like the Disneyfied form of happy endings\(^6\) characteristic of their media narratives. His central argument came down to differences between the psychology of information versus form. Burke averred, “We cannot take a recurrent pleasure in the new (in information) but we can in the natural (in form)” (Burke, 1968, p. 35). In his later essay on form, Burke divided form
into five aspects, including progressive form (syllogistic/qualitative), repetitive form, conventional form, and minor or incidental forms (Burke, 1968). As previewed, comic book literature prescribes several genres, including the graphic literary, fantasy, and genres encapsulating superhero mythos. Comic book credibility is pivotal in further positing the existence of comic book as a subculture, tied to capitalism but independent in its formation and substantiation of communitas, liminoid venture, and ultimate flow engagement. Concluding chapter 2, I return to an example of literature as equipment for living that Burke posited in *Philosophy*, and attempt to answer or interpret Burke’s quandary⁷, utilizing the established theoretical terminology defined in this chapter, while incorporating the example of the comic book medium as a textual lens. The theoretical unpacking in chapter 2 further contextualizes the questions that I answer in the third and fourth chapters, in which larger specific case studies of separate comic book series service the goal of the project in bridging Burke and Turner’s works together.

Burke’s Aversion to Capitalism and Cries for Artistic Purity in *Counter-Statement, Permanence and Change, and The Philosophy of Literary Form*

*Identifying Burke’s Pedestal of Art Appreciation in Counter-Statement*

The earliest collected publication from Kenneth Burke demonstrated two life-long areas of interest and criticism for Burke: art and literature. Burke began his earliest collected publication, *Counter-Statement*, with an apropos plea commending the pure nature of art. Whilst teasing out an early stage of literary criticism beginning with Flaubert, Burke (1968) conveyed, “[Flaubert] seemed to feel that the artist closed one door and opened another, that the artist possessed something unintelligible to the non-artist” (Burke, 1968, p. 1). Burke continued,
noting “art was something to live in, like Shakespeare, like a continent” (Burke, p. 1). The first section on Flaubert is interesting in that Burke wrestled with Flaubert’s “contradictory attitudes…[between] art-to-display-art” and “art-to-conceal-art” (Burke, p. 7). Burke continued his “Adepts of ‘Pure’ Literature” essay with critiques on Pater and De Gourmont (Burke, 1968). Burke noted of Pater, “we must recognize his superior adjustment of technique to aesthetic interests” (Burk, p. 9). Burke saw Pater as a vanguard of prose, while admiring De Gourmont’s humanist vitality. Perhaps contextual to the times, Burke appeared to be in conflict with the concept of post-Industrial machinations influencing or even affecting pure art. One consistent contradiction Burke demonstrated was an acceptance of the availability of literature, itself a product of the printing press.

To summarize, Counter-Statement, initially published in 1931, came at a post-Bohemian period for Burke. Burke wrote with a sword, planting the seeds of literature and art’s importance in culture. Burke sought to approach literary criticism from the point of view of literature, highlighting the power of form, and the aesthetic aspects literature is capable of unleashing. Thus, Burke’s counter statement argued that literature and art function as a kind of rhetoric. One conclusion thus postulates Burke relegated, on some internal level, an unconscious or unspoken willingness to accept the ventures of industrialism that profiteered the belles-lettres de society. Such a compromise bodes to the conclusion of this chapter, in signifying an industrial form of artistic-aesthetic. One final observation acknowledges that while Burke’s art appreciation represents a critique out of modern time, his argument is relevant to a critique of late capitalist systems of production and consumption privy in this project. Burke’s interest in the purity of art and his array of theoretical communicative terms remain vital to the present and this study, specifically concerning Burke’s second published book in 1935, Permanence and Change.
Occupational Psychosis and Trained Incapacity in Permanence and Change

In his second book *Permanence and Change* (1984), Burked shifted his central focus away from the aesthetics of art criticism to more of a psychological critique of motives and expressions of the rhetorics of form. Burke attempted to bend perceptions of literature and art, in an effort to evince how they function to subtly construct arguments, show perspectives, or challenge existing pieties. While the rhythmic arguments posited by Burke in *Permanence* entail exhaustive quandaries expositing his three segmented criticisms, “On Interpretation,” “Perspective by Incongruity,” and “The Basis of Simplification,” the chief functions of these criticisms digress from the centrality of this project. However, Burke opined several observations that abed his position on art and capitalism, while introducing several key terms important to this undertaking.

In his chapter entitled “Occupational Psychosis,” Burke (1984) avowed his watchfulness toward tensions between the psychological and capital functions of society. Burke (1984) insisted, “today our psychotic openness to fads, the great cry for innovation engendered by competitive capitalism, could seem to be in keeping with the marked unstableness of our economic and social expectancies” (p. 39). Burke acknowledged mirrored changes that occur over time, both in trends attributed to capitalism and in social climates. The significance or burden hence lies on the artist, “who deals largely with the occupational psychosis in its derivative aspects. He projects it into new realms of imagery” (Burke, p. 39). Burke attributed the artist with a unique perspective of reflective interpretation. For example, situations where business is reflected into art, like the Gimmick Age of comics when production for the sake of profit [i.e., variant covers of comics] resulted in backlash from fans and consumers [i.e., the comics boom nearly collapsed for good].
In sum, occupational psychosis is a useful term in explaining Burke’s potential inability to focus on specific aesthetic texts at a time when literature represented one of a decidedly fewer range of liminoid experiences to theorize over. Burke’s theorizing of occupational psychosis as “a certain way of thinking” that escorts “a certain way of living” (Burke, 1984, p. 240) will play a large part in chapter 3’s conversation on the trained incapacities of comic book consumers. Per contra, Burke could not yet quantify the significant role capitalism might play in the projection of the artist’s communicative power. Thus, Burke’s skepticism of art under capitalism heightened in his 1941 publication, The Philosophy of Literary Form.

[Pure] Art cannot exist under Capitalism: Selective Arguments from The Philosophy of Literary Form

In Philosophy, Burke (1973) is transitioning into one of the larger theoretical focuses of his career, that of symbolic action. Potentially, Burke wanted to look at how forms and contents interact with context. The intersection of form/content with context is highlighted by numerous themes, including his self-titled essay/argument in “The Nature of Pure Art under Capitalism” (Burke, 1973, p. 314). While in Philosophy Burke (1973) comprised separate essay arguments of importance, the key points highlighted in art/capital included the following outline:

1. Work-patterns and ethical patterns are integrally related.
2. The ethical values of work are in its application of the competitive equipment to cooperative ends.
3. Under capitalism this basic integration between work-patterns and ethical patterns is constantly in jeopardy, and even frequently impossible.
4. Such a frustration of the combative-cooperative fusion under capitalism is a grave stimulus to wars.
5. “Pure” art tends to promote a state of acceptance.
6. “Pure art is safest only when the underlying moral system is sound.
7. [Burke’s argument] is by no means intended to imply that “pure” or “acquiescent” art should be abandoned. (p. 314-321)
This critique of art under capitalism is highlighted throughout the history of the comics medium. Golden Age comics oscillated between pro-war propaganda, titillating fantasy, and burgeoning creativity hampered by the serial demands of monthly publication. In addition, comics have grown to facilitate functions as propaganda, socially relevant commentary, etc., reflecting and reifying the cultural zeitgeist under the constraints of a mass-marketed commodity. Swartz (1995) recognized all these relevant features of social significance in his argument for broadening the popular cultural forms as equipment for living. I posit the form and flow of these stories reflect new cultural forms that can be considered as providing innovative equipment for living under capitalism, just as Burke maintained for art and literature. This understanding of the polyvalent capacities of comic book texts allow discussion later for the medicinal or somatic benefits that the medium might co-constitute with audiences.

These comprised points facilitate discussion throughout the remaining chapters. I seek to highlight where Burke is justified in his skepticism as well as where Burke stops short in his critique. Burke does go on to theorize aesthetic potentiality as a *perspective by incongruity*, but not as affective aesthetic for identification, which is where Turner comes into play. Thus, a case is made that areas of Burke’s quandary might be complemented vis-à-vis Turner’s *Liminoid/Flow* discussion, evidenced through the modern cultural signifiers of graphic novels *Green Lantern: Rebirth* and *Y: The Last Man*. At the end of chapter 2, I return to Burke’s exploration in *Philosophy*, but first it is necessary to generate an anthropologic tracing of Turner’s placement of flow.
Victor Turner and the Anthropology of the Liminoid and Flow

*Victor Turner Context and Contribution*

In *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), Victor Turner executed a theoretical emphasis on the linear tracing of anthropological roots of human ritual and performance terminology and their evolution toward modern interpretations and use. In his essay “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology,” Turner (1982) constituted his argument by establishing the roots of symbology\(^{12}\), semiotics\(^ {13}\), and symbols\(^ {14}\) (Turner, 1982). Turner (1982) examined an anthropological lineage of ritual, embracing Van Gennep’s “three phases in a rite of passage: *separation*, *transition*\(^ {15}\), and *incorporation*” (Turner, p. 24). Transition becomes a focal point for Turner, exploring liminality’s “capacity for variation and experiment [which] becomes more clearly dominant in societies in which *leisure* is sharply demarcated from *work*, and especially in all societies which have been shaped by the Industrial Revolution” (p. 29). The post-Industrial Revolution move is central to the advancement of the work/leisure cycle\(^ {16}\) in Western societies, which Turner also recognized as being influenced by socio-structural barriers between pre- and post-Industrial ritual among cultures. The exciting contradiction within capitalism that produces a leisure class occurs via the agency of the leisure class to question, experiment, and challenge these structural barriers, such as the case within fandom reaction to the editorial decisions passed upon their favored commodities. Turner’s contextualization of the liminality, post-Industrial Revolution, ignites the modernist turn from which the critical elements of flow and the liminoid might be highlighted in an effort to erect the significance of capitalist movements related to the conception of comic book culture, and its role in aiding Burke’s quandary over *art/capital*. 
Richard Schechner (2002) best ascribed Turner’s theoretical distinctions between traditional and modern cultures. “With industrialization and the division of labor, many of the functions of ritual were taken over by the arts, entertainment, and recreation. Turner used the term ‘liminoid’ to describe ritual-like types of symbolic action that occurred in leisure activities” (Schechner, 2002, p. 67). Schechner (1998) conceptualized Turner’s concepts of liminal and liminoid in *Performance Theory* (Schechner, 1998), bridging Turner’s own aboriginal or anthropological tracings of the liminal/liminoid, to a modern comparison of their societal functions. Schechner (1998) explained: “Turner further asserts that the liminal phases of the rites of tribal agrarian, hunting, and traditional societies are analogous to the artworks and leisure activities of industrial and post-industrial societies, [which Turner deemed] ‘liminoid’, meaning they are like liminal rites but not identical to them.” (p. 168). Schechner highlighted the significant different between liminal/liminoid, noting, “Basically liminal rites are obligatory while liminoid arts and entertainments are voluntary” (Schechner, p. 168). Acknowledging the difference between liminal and liminoid functions within cultural rituals allows the liminal to be deemphasized in place of the liminoid. Thus, the agency of choice which occurs in the liminoid becomes an underlining function due to its nature as *voluntary*.

Volunteerism elicits a participatory function in which the acting party operates without cultural obligation, not unlike comic fans who use comics as part of adolescent rites of passage or initiatory forays into some comics communitas. Thus, the liminoid evokes selection or choice from its participants. Turner contended, “the liminoid is more like a commodity—indeed, often is a commodity, which one selects and pays for—than the liminal” (Turner, 1982, p. 55). The act of choice or choosing is critical to the contextual functioning of the community members of
comic book culture. Comic culture functions inside the restraints of capitalism, but there are no obligations toward membership other than participation. As participation in the comic community requires [to a degree] the acquisitioning of certain relevant knowledge privy to the comic community [i.e., the canon of superhero continuity, writers/artists worth paying attention to, etc.], members make a liminoid rite of passage to participate, via their audience participation in comic shops or on online fansites, and their monetary purchasing of narrative properties with the intent of reader-flow engagement.

The Six Qualities of a Flow Aesthetic

As discussed in the previous section, by distinguishing between the liminal and liminoid, Turner (1982) regulated leisure rituals or play within the liminoid (Turner, 1982, 1988). As Turner identified the communicative functions of cultural ritual, he divided the ritual process into three specific forms of communitas\(^{17}\), each with distinct associations toward the liminal and liminoid. Discussion of the liminal, liminoid, and communitas are critical to understanding Turner’s adoption of flow\(^{18}\). Turner (1982) began discussion of flow with Csikszentmihalyi and MacAlloon’s interpretation, where “flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement…[in] a state in which action follows action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part…” (Turner, p. 56). Turner approves of Csikszentmihalyi’s method to extend flow past the boundaries of play and into the larger space of creative experience (Turner, 1982). Turner defined Csikszentmihalyi’s key features of flow in terms of six elements or qualities (Turner, 1982). These elements or qualities of flow exert:

1. The experience of merging action and awareness.
2. Merging action and awareness is made possible by a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field.

3. Loss of ego [ergo, the actor/agent/consumer becomes irrelevant or immersed in flow]

4. A person “in flow” finds himself “in control of his actions and of the environment.” [S/he] may not know this at the time of “flow,” but reflecting on it [s/he] may realize that [her/his] skills were matched to the demands made on [her/him] by ritual, art, or sport.

5. “Flow” usually contains coherent, non-contradictory demands for action, and provides clear, unambiguous feedback to a person’s actions…Culture reduces the flow possibility to defined channels [i.e., performing, reading, competition, etc].

6. Finally, “flow” is “autotelic,” i.e., it seems to need no goals or rewards outside itself...[human behavior] suggests people will culturally manufacture situations which will release flow, or individually seek it outside their ascribed stations in life if these [situations] are “flow-resistant.” (Turner, 1982, pp. 56-58)

These six elements or qualities of flow comprise a rudimentary definition of flow’s communicative importance and ritualized aesthetic power. Given the broad range of potential opportunities for flow engagement, Turner’s example of literature teases the concept of the reader’s imagination as fundamental criteria for the aesthetic experience. To explicate the potential of literary aesthetics one step further, I purport the nature of the graphic novel, as combined literary and visually artistic expression, creates a limited stimulus field type of vessel, from which the audience actively participates [or engages a liminoid function] in a capitalist venture with the expectations of a trained incapacity19 for an aesthetic flow experience. In the following section, the constitutive power of comics will be explicated in an effort to qualify the credibility of the comic book medium for the sake of further theoretical analysis.

Comic Book Culture: A Genre Bridge between Art and Capitalism and the Theoretical Bridge between Burke and Turner

Several noted comic book scholars aver to the cultural significance of the medium. Roger Sabin (1993) proclaimed the value of comic-centered analytic texts, constituting a unique...
“language, with their own grammar, syntax and punctuation. They are not some hybrid form halfway between ‘literature’ and ‘art,’ but a medium in their own right” (Sabin, 1993, p. 9). Matthew Pustz (1999) acknowledged that comic book culture garners strength from the unification of readers/fans’ devotion to the genre, and proficient literacy with regard to the medium (Pustz, 1999). The group of reader/consumers further constitutes a community by way of their communicative influence on one another. Duncan and Smith (2009) assessed, “many comic book readers tend to engage in dialogue about the comic books they read…in comic book clubs, in fanzines, in APAs (amateur press alliances), at comic book conventions, in online forums, or simply among informal friends” (p. 13). These authors clearly denote the co-constitutive value of comic book communitas as fandom, where ritual participations often invoke numerous features of flow in resulting discussions and debates over characters and stories.

Henry Jenkins positioned the reading of a comic book text, performed by fans, noting “fan reception can not and does not exist in isolation, but is always shaped through input from other fans” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 210). Pustz (1999) recognized the culturally framed audience of comic book readers, whereby “limited access [between outsiders and insiders] promotes insularity and, to go along with it, a certain amount of postmodern self-referentiality that is the source of part of readers’ pleasure in comic books” (Pustz, 1999, p. 23). This kind of fan ownership or association to the source material creates a sense of fan agency, further tightening the communal nature between writers and readers, distributors and consumers, narrative style/performance and audience interpretation.

Another consideration of importance is the communicative function of comic books. Why do they underline a rhetorical text worthy of explication and analysis? McCloud described the interactive machinations of comic book reading. McCloud (1994) begins by defining the comics
form under the guise of “sequential art” or “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (McCloud, 1994, p. 8-9). McCloud disclosed reader association and/or attachment to the medium, generalizing the manner in which “[audience] identities and awareness are invested in many inanimate objects every day…[which] can trigger numerous transformations in the way others see us and in the way we see ourselves” (p. 38). In this statement, McCloud is closing the gap between readers/consumers and their texts/commodities, exposing how comics become extensions of readers, just as texts extend the thoughts of the writers/artists from which they originated.

McCloud’s strongest contribution identified the root power of comics, in their ability to “[act] as an intermediary between storyteller and audience,” while striving for synaesthetics, or striving to unite the different art forms that appeal to the five senses by way of internal creative interpretation (McCloud, p. 172). McCloud concluded that “The dance of the visible and the invisible is at the very heart of comics…creator and reader are partners in the invisible creating something out of nothing, time and time again” (McCloud, p. 205). McCloud explained his understanding of the communal power and agency of comic books with an eerie similarity to Turner’s explication of cultural rituals and the liminoid, emphasizing its ritual participatory characteristics as constitutive of a comics communitas. Next it is critical to return to Burke (1973) in an effort to tease out one final demonstration of why is theoretical quandary will benefit from the rhetorical bridging of Turner’s work, Johns’ Green Lantern, and Vaughan’s Y: The Last Man.

The Beginnings of Synthesis: Burke Seeing Literature as “Equipment for Living” and the Intellectual Consumership of a Theory of Flow

Burke considers the nature of man as a symbol-using, -misusing, -used animal, making us
societally vulnerable to symbolic action that can be both corrupt and curative (Burke, 1997). In acknowledging this notion of curative, or looking for medicinal methods, I unpack two key arguments exploring how the aesthetic of comics work as a medicinal kind of soma, in that the polyvalent form of comics releases flow to readers. However, to engage in comic literature is to read them, to read them is to purchase them, as they exist as serial commodities, and within the synergistic demands/structures of capitalism. Thus, the liminoid choice to medicate through comic book flow is to actively partake in a commodity. Literature is not free in society and thus this equipment for living\textsuperscript{22} must operate inside capitalism if the largest body of persons is to be allowed access to this knowledge. Burke sought to denote how we use art and literature above and beyond how it uses us, just as I ascribe to defend how we can use comics beyond their monetary and/or surface aesthetic value.

However, two essays later in Philosophy, the chapter “Antony in Behalf of the Play,” provides a partial answer to Burke’s own quandary. First, he established a seemingly problematic evolution toward the status of art:

At times when the standards of criticism are set by a receptive class, as in the decadent stages of feudalism, the emphasis of the critic tends to be placed upon consumption. Conversely, in the Art for Art’s Sake movement of recent decades, we find the emphasis placed almost wholly upon production. Our practical inventor and business promoters of this period tended to emphasize the productive factor, assuming that in the large matter of consumption would take care of itself—and there was a corresponding trend in aesthetics, with the essence of art being seen in the “self expression” of the artist. (p. 329)

Burke is working to define the growing importance placed on critics or literary criticism. However, he sets up this argument by (re)defining the splinter between universal, i.e., timeless, post-industrial business trends that focus on consumption/criticism, rather than focusing on pure art or production. Burke then effectively answers himself in the following statement:

Today, in nonliterary fields, we are stressing neither production nor consumption, but the integration of the two. And in the aesthetic field, this emphasis might be paralleled by a
tendency to consider literature, not as a creator’s device for self-expression, nor as an audience’s device for amusement or instruction, but as a communicative relationship between writer and audience, with both parties actively participating. (p. 329)

With this statement, Burke identifies the symbolic symbiosis occurring between creators and audiences. Burke magnificently established the new role aesthetics played in post-Industrial society. However, while Burke does continue his lesson by engaging in a literary criticism over the writer/audience relationship in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, he stops his lesson short of naming and exploring the aesthetic itself, as well as creating emphasis on the significance of what I maintain Turner addressed via the liminoid interaction between writer/artist/performer and audience/consumer. In effect, Turner responds to Burke’s argument of art/capitalism by providing an identity and identification to the art aesthetic. Furthermore in *Philosophy*, Burke (1973) dedicated emphasis on warning audiences of the inherent dangers of capitalism, but never extended a fluid outline of what I posit to be an intellectual consumership of aesthetic identification. In addition to this theorization of an aesthetic identification, in chapter 4 I explore the nature of *soma*\(^{23}\) as a particular term of interest in diagnosing the strength of graphic literature as both a medicinal tool for coping as well as literature for living. Thus, providing a link between comics’ polyvalent roles as commodities, aesthetics, soma, and literature for living reifies Burke’s notion of a *paradox of substance*\(^{24}\).

This comparison examines soma as *escapist entertainment vs. equipment for living*, but maintains that comics are not just either/or but potential for both/and. This both/and is the paradox of substance according to Burke (1945) because comics function as both commodity and art. According to Burke’s theory of a paradox of substance, there are always twin potentials in its form. Burke brings paradox up as his perspective by incongruity calls our attention to the paradox of substance. In this understanding, nothing is guaranteed, submission to commodities,
etc, but the potentiality is waiting to become activated. In his call for attention toward critical media studies as equipment for living, Swartz (1995) stated these commodity forms are potential because there is a paradox of substance because there is always potential for art/literature to serve as equip for living. Thus, Swartz helps answer the soma argument to be identified in chapter 4. Furthermore, Swartz and the concept of soma aid Turner in talking about aesthetics as they reveal how forms of aesthetic do more than just please audiences.

Concluding Thoughts and Theoretical Foreshadowing

Before transitioning toward the central case study chapters of this project, it is important to first reconsider the theoretical legs of this chapter. First, I examined Burke’s critique of art and literature under capitalism as vulnerable to the occupational psychosis of profit-driven commodification. The resulting trained incapacity of this capitalistic perspective, Burke suggested, may find counter statements in the psychology of form in the creative innovations of pure art that capitalism inadvertently requires. Because of this paradox of substance, which art and literature can exploit experimentally, both artists and critics can explore creative possibilities as equipment for living under the structures of capitalism and commodified culture. Although Burke theorized a comic corrective of perspective by incongruity that might challenge the pervasive ideology of capitalism, his optimism for aesthetic identifications remained vague as focused theory toward symbolic action primarily within language. The aesthetic elements of a comic corrective thus remain undeveloped.

Second, I examined Turner’s notions of liminoid participation in the aesthetics of flow as a ritual participation in communitas. Positing a leisure class that exploits the contradictions of capitalism to potentially question and challenge dominant cultural conditions, Turner infers that
the voluntary ritual participations of liminoids can create spaces and sites of resistant meanings and aesthetic experiences. The six aesthetic elements of flow help to distinguish the liminoid ritual participationsthat can disrupt commodified culture with immersive involvement in creative aesthetic experiences of play. Third, this participative involvement in a co-constitutive aesthetic experience also characterizes how Sabin, Jenkins, and McCloud have characterized fan cultures and creative interactions of comic book culture. Because comic books offer a site for aesthetic participation and creative engagement of possibility that competes with and within capitalist structures and strictures, the managerial industry of comics must contend with the meanings and pleasures of creators and fans who vie for authorial control over commodified creations. As with art and literature, McCloud affirms graphic storytelling in comics invites an aesthetic participation that is psychologically and textually akin to active co-authorship. It is here we may theorize for a comic [book] corrective of comics flow.

Finally, the comic [book] corrective of flow, and the dynamics of aesthetic identification, is further exploited in the following chapters. Thus, by introducing this concept of intellectual consumership via the term aesthetic identification, I aver to the possibility of a co-existence between the puristic intentions of art within the channels of distributive capitalism, when by orienting audience liminoid participation, a theory of flow might posit itself. This theory of flow further exhibits tension in that where art can become capital there exists a paradox of substance between art and commodity. I explore this paradox of substance between art and commodity in chapter 3, advocating analysis through the example of the superhero Green Lantern. In chapter 4, I return to the theory of flow, where I postulate the potential methodological functions of an aesthetic flow for audiences/readers/consumers. Utilizing the graphic novel text Y: The Last Man, I posit this aesthetic flow possesses potential medicinal or somatic functions for its narrow
majority audience of white male consumers. Finally, in chapter 5 I return to my initial quandary over the audience anxiety of the corporate merger between the Mouse House and the House of Ideas, theorizing the greater implications of the art/capital argument and the cultural deterrents of flow.
CHAPTER 3

SUPERHERO COMMODITY REBIRTH, RENEWAL, AND RHETORICAL EXTENSIONS IN *GREEN LANTERN: REBIRTH*

In review of analysis, chapter 1 established a distinct audience anxiety associated to the current shift presented by Disney’s acquisition of Marvel Entertainment. This corporate merger highlights the quandary situated between consumer culture and the shadow of big business capitalism in Western culture. Generating a representative hanging anxiety of this Marvel/Mouse merger, this author shall return to the problematic of this example in the concluding chapter of analysis. However, before unearthing the opening situation posited between audience perceptions of art under capitalism, continued exploration, explanation, and general unpacking of the rhetorical-theoretical, critical comic book, and consumer culture terms are necessary.

Chapter 2 first allocated the discharging of Burke’s central critique concerning the state of art under capitalism, unpacking necessary theoretical terms of relevance. In chapter 2, I next accredited Turner’s treatment of flow, as an aesthetic experience of liminoid choice, as representing an opportunity to expose a possible exception to Burke’s critique. Chapter 2 then contextualized an abbreviated introduction of comic book culture, as an imperative example of consumer culture driven in function by the symbiotic blending of capitalistic rules and the liminoid democracy of audience/consumer. In demonstrating the multifaceted capacities of the comic book/graphic novel, chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate two specific case studies, of which the intersection of Turner’s work on Burke’s critique can be made clear, in an effort to position the audience anxiety associated with Disney’s buyout of Marvel.

Previewing Themes of Chapter 3

The function of chapter 3 seeks to demonstrate the importance of the storyline/graphic
novel *Green Lantern: Rebirth* (2004) as a unique lens with which to observe the functions of comic book culture. Analysis of the history of Green Lantern, the symbolism of *Rebirth*, and the rhetorical objective accomplished in this storyline will illuminate an explanation into the co-constitutive devices that both build and sustain comic book audiences. Chapter 3 then explores the rhetorical functions of retroactive continuity or Retcon, as a narrative device that feeds the seriality and circulation of comic book history/culture. Concurrently, observation of author Geoff Johns’ narrative *style* will extricate how the Green Lantern character/series ignited a consumer following while planting commodity seeds for a potential billion-dollar media of merchandise. Finally, analysis will explore how *Rebirth* exhibits the symptoms of Burke’s critique of capitalism, whilst inviting Turner’s exercising of the liminiod. These two theorists’ work will be explicated via an analysis of the signification of *rebirth* as the ultimate audience and commodity message. This theme of audience anxiety is juxtaposed later in chapter 4, as I explore the theoretical medicinal benefits of comic book consumption as remedy for current Western sociological unease, i.e., *graphic literature as equipment for living*.

*Green Lantern as Generational Superhero Archetype*

Green Lantern is interesting because it's such at the forefront of my mindset, my writers' mindsets, my readers... the entire industry for that matter. And yet that wasn't the case at all five years ago.

*George Tramountanas*

Superhero narratives have always moved in a cyclic nature as commodities. The commoditization of superhero properties in comic books ensures that characters maintain a likelihood of existence so long as they remain creatively popular and financially prosperous. Unfortunately for capitalists, the public sphere has become a razor sharp lynch pen of fanboy scrutiny toward inauthentic companies peddling rehashed books that steal to sell instead of
borrow to benefit. Fans legitimize the comic culture with evolving systems of textual worth (Brown, 1997). Staple characters like Superman or X-Men no longer standardize name-brand necessity. The comic book culture is self-empowered by the currency of top writers, great characterization, and the continuity that accompanies great stories (Brown, 1997; Pustz, 1999). Dedicated fans and readers sieve the competition, competition more abundantly competitive each year, and strain out the imitation works from the gold standard books. Green Lantern scribe Geoff Johns noted of audience participation, “The internet is like the wild, wild west, but at conventions you've got huge panels, you meet people face to face, and you see the size of the crowd…It's an interactive thing, and that's what I like about it” (Phegley, 2009). Thus, the audiences become co-constitutive in the comic book market, with their own preconceived trained incapacities toward established genre forms.

In this section, I offer an examination of the resurgence of Green Lantern in the last 5 years, a fringe superhero property reignited by one of the industry’s superstar writers, Geoff Johns. A word-of-mouth currency heralded Geoff Johns 2004-current redux of the Green Lantern franchise for DC Comics. Since 2004, Green Lantern has shot up the comic book sales charts, establishing the long-term viability for both the character of Green Lantern and Johns’ as a visionary writer/creator. Further, Johns’ work on GL: Rebirth exemplifies rhetorical tools necessary for creating a successful modern superhero mythology, in canon with decades of continuity. However, in an effort to dissect the Green Lantern significance for a wider audience readership, excavating the history of the character is necessary to establish a worthwhile argument.
The Complicated Legacy of Green Lantern

*Green Lantern as “New Deal” Propaganda*

Green Lantern initially debuted for DC Comics in July 1940, under the creative guise of artist Martin Nodell and writer Bill Finger; whereby the character Allan Scott held the first Green Lantern title (Dougall, 2004). Scott was a Blonde-headed everyman whose green ring and lantern were initially magic-based powers, as was an oft-used motif of Golden Age heroes attempting to mask general comparisons to their archetypal model, Superman. In *Comic Book Nation* (2003), historian Bradford Wright recanted a detailed historical tracing of DC Comics and Green Lantern’s earliest societal storylines. Scott’s Lantern debuted in mid-1940 before, joining the Justice Society of America team in the pages of All Star Comics #3 (Dougall, 2004; Wright, 2003). As members of the JSA, this Golden Age superteam demonstrated a consistent ability to fight crime in the vein of reinforcing Roosevelt’s New Deal policies (Wright, 2003). In multiple stories chartered in Scott’s initial years of conception, Green Lantern represented the common man and/or the Roosevelt administration by taking on crooked mortgage and loan operations, shipping tycoons, and even loftier international Rooseveltian scenarios mirroring the Good Neighbor policies of the day (Wright, 2003). Although the legacy of Green Lantern would change hands overtime, when characters would receive creative revisions, one ideal representation that mainstays with this superhero legacy is a foundation of redemptive violence. Wright (2003) asserted, “the Green Lantern redresses [the situational] imbalance of power with his fists, demonstrating that legal protection works best when backed by a healthy dose of righteous violence” (Wright, 2003, p. 23). While these tropes of physicality remained in tact, the comic book history between audience consumers and capitalistic publishers would mirror the evolutionary changing of the guard.
The Silver Age Reboot of American Idealism

As the post war climate of ideological priorities shifted in the American public sphere, comic book readership lost its edge of importance that it sustained during WWII (Wright, 2003). For a great deal of Americans, the public sphere resonated with a state of pride and national supremacy. In concordance with a decline in sales and this shift in public concern, the comic book Golden Age shifted to resemble new American sensibilities, thus marking the dawn of the Silver Age (Wright, 2003; Coville, n. d.). Pustz (1999) noted, “DC shifted their emphasis back to the superheroes… [The superhero] revival helped to create comic fandom, as older readers who enjoyed both the original heroes and their new counterparts began to contact and meet each other” (p. xi). The Silver Age of comics marked an opportunity for publishers like DC Comics’ to circulate new characters and/or updates, or reboots, of older ones. This move of rebooted characters was heralded by the introduction of a new Flash, Barry Allen, followed by re-imaginings of Hawkman, the Atom, and a new Green Lantern, Hal Jordan (Duncan & Smith, 2009).

The history of Hal Jordan closely resembles the American monomyth structure outlined by Jewett and Lawrence (2002), which is highlighted shortly. Jordan initially existed as an updated version of Green Lantern, following DC Comics reboot of their superheroes at the beginning of comics’ Silver Age (Lang & Trimble, 1988). Golden Age characters steeped in mysticism were siphoned out of comics, replaced by characters that embraced science and technology as a kind of superhero catalyst (Lange & Trimble, 1988). The Silver Age transition also represented a shift in the type of characterizations introduced by writers. Jordan’s Green Lantern signified the monomythic ideology of a hands-on problem solvers, akin to mythic Americans like Henry Ford and Thomas Edison (Lange & Trimble, 1988); a kind of punch-first,
ask questions later characterization familiar to Western thought of the day. As the prototypical pursuer of justice, Jordan originally maintained a hierarchic ideology of strict adherence to authority. This adherence to authority mirrored Jordan’s civilian role as an Air Force pilot. However, his rebellious tendencies and unbridled nature of risk-taking, inside the constraints of the law, idealized both the American spirit following WWII and served as example of an extraordinary individual separated or above the common person (Reynolds, 1994).

These tensions between adherence and rebellion also reflected a strong emphasis of characterization by DC’s editing staff, and signify GL’s staying power over the years. During Dennis O’Neal’s famous short-lived series *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (O’Neal, 2004) in the early 70s, Jordan inhabited the role of moral student under the guise of superhero Green Arrow’s Leftist civil activist ideologies. In O’Neal’s 13-issue run of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, each issue or chapter focused on an area of 60s-era American societal unrest. The two heroes’ journey across America via pick-up truck, righting the wrongs of religious cults, proprietary racist slumlords, anti-Native American sentiments, and old-fashioned Communist stereotypes (O’Neal, 2004; Moore, 2003). This super hero-quest of progressive metaphors provided substantial depth to the characterized humanity of Jordan and his perception of moral justice. However, the humanizing growth of Jordan came to an abrupt end during a pivotal character arc of stories in the mid-90s to be discussed shortly.

*Green Lantern as Superhero Cultural Stereotypes*

Several other iterations of Green Lantern emerged over the next quarter century. In the late 1968, DC introduced the short-tempered Irishman Guy Gardner as the newest Green Lantern, incarnate (Dougall, 2004). Naturally, this version embodied Irish-American stereotypes
such as bright red hair, cocky fortitude, and an aggressive demeanor toward women. In 1972, amidst sibling rivalry from Marvel’s introduction of Blaxploitation “Hero for Hire” Luke Cage/Power Man (DeFalco et al., 2009), DC introduced their first African American superhero in the form of a “backup Green Lantern, John Stewart” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 59). The torch was passed on again in the early 1994, as DC instituted yet another Green Lantern in Kyle Rayner. As a modern GL, Rayner’s civic identity was that of a cartoonist-cum-artist (Dougall, 2004). Rayner sported a west coast grunge-emo haircut, and his youth-like spirit and liberal arts sensibilities set Rayner apart from the traditional blue-collar superhero mentality.

Rayner clearly represented an effort to invite younger/modern readers who had tired of the now-graying Hal Jordan. However, Rayner remained a polarizing figure among superhero fans and readers, and neither Guy Gardner nor John Stewart ever captured the reader spirit or narrative characterization that sustained Jordan’s popularity over time. This audience identification with Hal Jordan centralizes his role as the preeminent Green Lantern and the central protagonist of Geoff Johns’ franchise-igniting Green Lantern: Rebirth (2004-05). Thus, the central focus of the remainder of this chapter examines Hal Jordan as Green Lantern. In examining Jordan’s characterization as Lantern, it is critical to define what makes Jordan and Green Lantern a superhero, and how the mythic symbolism of comic book melodrama sets the stage for analysis of Green Lantern: Rebirth, in an effort to understand the aesthetic liminoid responses of audiences under comic culture’s artfully capitalist regime. I now examine the mythic functions of the superhero, as applied to Jordan’s Green Lantern.
The Right to Remain Categorized: Qualifications and Contradictions of Defining a Superhero

*The Monomyth*

While consideration of Green Lantern as an accepted superhero may appear relevant to non-familiar audiences, perhaps a rigorous definition of the underlining superhero genre tropes associated with comic book superhero ideology is necessarily warranted at this time. Defining a superhero may carry as heavy a burden as the hero’s responsibilities. Jewett and Lawrence (2002) super-situated the prototypical American hero as a loner built out of the Western myth, or American monomyth:

>A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (p. 6)

Jewett and Lawrence (2002) compared this scene to the African plains of *The Lion King* or the serene bridge aboard the *Enterprise* on *Star Trek* (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002), but this prototypical setting could suffice for Superman’s Metropolis or Smallville, or perhaps even the oblique peacefulness of Earth’s atmosphere, amidst Sector 2814. Once an evil disruption to the status quo is presented, it is up to the frontier vigilante/outsider to swoop in, in a demonstration of above-average strength and wherewithal, and thwart the evil so that the community may return to tranquility (Lawrence & Jewett). Jewett and Lawrence posit a familiar setting of action and attribution in their monomythic theory of heroism. An important note is the constant struggle of preservation. However, Jewett and Lawrence contend that once the peace is restored, the vigilante recedes, or rides off into the sunset.

Unfortunately, Jewett and Lawrence’s established idealism of resolution runs contra to the nature of comic book superheroism on several levels. First, comic books as means of capital,
as short-term literature commodities, run in a serial nature. This is to say, comic books are published, or run, until sales decline or publishers close shop. Comics by the nature of their capitalistic endgame are a finite product that runs infinitely. Thus, there can be no finite return to a status quo. Otherwise, the serialized nature of superhero storytelling would be jeopardized.

Today more than ever, superhero tales with a question mark, even at the end of respective story arcs. For example, the acclaimed *Batman: Year One* (Miller, 1988) ran a narrative collecting the issues of *Batman* #404-407. However, Frank Miller’s story does not end with Batman forever rendering Gotham City a tranquil city of peace. On the contrary, the end of *Year One* marks the entrance of the Joker, Batman’s nemesis, and the beginning of Batman’s tenured relationship with soon-to-be Police Commissioner Gordon. Thus, *Batman: Year One* demonstrated the serial nature of comics to re-imagine, reinvent, reinterpret, but always resume circulation of publication ad infinitum.

*Superheroes as Genre-Specific Mythologies*

Away from the broadly defined Western monomyth, Richard Reynolds’ *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1994) aptly confines superheroes to its own genre. Reynolds (1994) purported seven headings that together assemble and identify the superhero archetype, as exemplified in the first 13 pages of *Action Comics* #1 in 1938 (Reynolds, 1994). These seven qualifications are as follows:

1. The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.
2. At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.
3. The hero’s devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
4. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
5. Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.

6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.

7. The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder (Reynolds, 1994, p. 16).

Reynolds’ template derived from the Superman origin registers as a template for most of the superhero creations throughout comics’ Golden Age and beyond. However, several updated deviations acknowledge the changing cultural ideology of superheroes with the narrative origin tropes of yesteryear. In a similar yet simplified explication, Peter Coogan (2006) contended the modern equation for the superhero genre requires only three key elements: mission, powers, and identity or MPI (Coogan, 2006).

Superhero Qualifications; Hal Jordan’s Green Lantern as Ideological Status Quo

Hal Jordan’s embodiment of the Green Lantern mantel exhibits a generous portion of the mythic tropes associated with [super]heroism. In accordance to Lawrence and Jewett’s monomyth, Jordan subsists as an ideological outsider. His continual journey for justice follows the archetypal nodes of the Lone Ranger (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002). Like the Western myth of the Lone Ranger, Jordan conceals his identity via a similar-shaped mask. In addition, Jordan’s backup Green Lantern John Stewart, acts as a makeshift Tonto in a way that reifies Jordan’s white male positioning as forever the central protagonist. In the Arthurian tradition, Jordan garnishes a ring as his primary weapon of choice, no doubt a nod to his white ancestors, as well as universal symbol of royalty and/or authority. Jordan’s ring is of alien/technological origin, i.e., Reynolds’ trope of science as magic (Reynolds, 1994).

Brandishing his power ring, Jordan summons his own internal willpower, which
combines with his power ring’s mystical technologies in order to create any construct imaginable. By this might, Jordan’s power is only limited to his imagination, and thus he fulfills the honor of god-like powers, and his civilian status in the Air Force reifies his patriotism (Reynolds, 1994). Jordan’s militant patriotism is fueled by his tragic origin, as he watched his pilot father suffer a fatal jet plane crash as a young child (Johns, 2005; Reynolds, 1994). Jordan’s elite status as a galactic enforcer of peace, mixed with his unparalleled strength of willpower, exalts his level of self-righteousness above reproach of Earth or Oan Law. While these narrative tropes help to stabilize if not validate Green Lantern’s positioning within the superhero genre, these mythic assets were not able to protect Hal Jordan from his greatest nemesis to date, the Gimmick Age of comics.

The Rhetoric of Retroactive Continuity and the Return to Status Quo in Green Lantern: Rebirth

The Gimmick Age of Comics as Prelude to Green Lantern: Rebirth

At times public opinion concerning the timelines and cultural shifts in comics mirror the muddled continuities of character histories in the comics themselves. Many recognize that Crisis on Infinite Earths (Wolfman, 1986), a DC-Universe-spanning 12-issue universe reboot, ignited both company-wide and industry-wide change in the way comics continuity is handled. I argue that the popularity of this new grand-scale narrative of superhero storytelling ignited the shift to an Event Age of storytelling that is still in contention as of 2010. Comic memorabilia and published enthusiast James Coville blended the happenings of the 80s emergent Event Age through the 90s narrative storytelling handle of overproduction and character exploitation, in what he called the Gimmick and Image Ages, respectively (Coville, n. d.). Furthermore, emergence of magazines like Wizard’s hot-list of monthly writers and artists contributed to a
consumer culture shift in emphasis for comic book audiences’ interests. Duncan and Smith (2009) protruded that *Wizard* itself secured a form of franchising as a commodity brand of who’s who comic book buzz. Jeffrey Brown (1997) argued this shift in interest signifies the roll fandom plays in producing a unique form of cultural capital (Brown, 1997). In Matthew Pustz’ *Comic Book Culture* (1999), he argued this give-and-take relationship between comics distributors and consumer audiences crafted a meddling history of capital manipulation via consumer speculation in the 90s. While I revisit the significant ramifications of comic book culture and capitalism in the conclusion of chapter 5, the industry norms of 1990s superhero storytelling are significant for creating the problematic that Geoff Johns (2004-05) addressed head-on in his narrative opus, *Green Lantern: Rebirth*.

As previewed, the 90s demonstrated an unprecedented fortitude toward exploiting characters via multifarious methods to drive up comics’ wobbling consumer speculation market. To an extent, these methods worked in the short-term. Books like *X-Men* #1, *X-Force*, and the black case-sealed *Death of Superman* issue sold issues in the millions and created the kind of monstrous template that the editors of DC and Marvel abused over time (Coville, n. d.; Wright, 2003). DC’s success on the *Death of Superman* (1992) storyline coincided with their *Knightfall* (1993) year(s)-long story in which Batman himself broke his back in battle and succeeded his Bat-mantle [for a time] to another character. DC’s abuse of top-tier characters did not stop with their Big Three9. During the *Death of Superman* storyline continuation *Reign of the Supermen* (Jurgens, Kesel, Stern, Simonson, & Jones, 1993), the villainess alien Mongol teamed-up with the imposter Cyborg Superman, and succeeded in destroying Coast City, the hometown of none other than the Silver Age Green Lantern, Hal Jordan (Dougall, 2004). Unable to stop the
massacre from happening, the death of millions [juxtaposed to the sale of what, hundreds of thousands?] pushed Jordan’s sanity over the edge.

During Ron Marz’s (1994) divisive storyline *Emerald Twilight*, Jordan defied the Guardians’ orders in an attempt to rebuild Coast City from the power of his ring and willpower, subsequently lost his mind, broke the superhero code, and laid waste to a plethora of allies in a vengeful tirade. As a result, the now-villainous Jordan gained the code-name of *Parallax*, and proceeded to terrorize the DCU as a supervillain for years before Jordan killed himself to re-ignited Earth’s sun in Marz’s (1996) *The Final Night* storyline (Dougall, 2004; Marz, 1996). As penance for his crimes [and a corporate need to keep the character in publication and under copyright], Jordan’s soul became the host to one of DC’s other supernatural beings in the Spectre. In terms of his commodity value, Jordan’s Silver Age pedigree ensures his historical if not economical lineage of capital strength. Thus, just as no hero stays dead forever, no commodity remains untouched for too long, as both copyright laws and profit motives require these narrative commodities to remain in public circulation.

Nearly ten years later DC’s brought their newest renaissance man, writer Geoff Johns, who came to *Green Lantern* fresh off revitalizing the Justice Society of America tier of characters/books into a successful modernized interpretation. DC editors gave Johns the narrative keys to revamp and restart the long-ago dimmed *Green Lantern* series, and at this point, several significant aspects of importance bear additional notice. One, the fan culture remained split over the troubled fate DC allowed Silver Age Jordan to suffer in the mid-90s. Second, while the theme of character resurrection was nothing new, the prior response to character resurrections before *Rebirth* was generally negative among the comics community. These two points lead to two immediate conclusions. First, *continuity* is important to fans, and in turn important to
publishers. Second, Johns’ ability to craft a narrative that exciting the fan community and the publisher’s bottom line, extends a specific rhetorical space worthy of observation and analysis, as it pertains to the history of the comic book medium, fanboy culture, and the post-9/11 zeitgeist of rebirth in the public sphere. In the next sections, I provide a limited outline of key narrative moments outlining Rebirth and the key narrative style moves employed by Johns’, which together comprise a synthesized template for Superhero Flow—an organic narrative coping mechanism innovated within comic books and unable to manifest itself outside of capitalist cycles.

“Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something…Green”: Green Lantern: Rebirth

I think the Green Lantern mythology has the potential to be one of the biggest franchises in the world, superhero or otherwise…It’s as epic as Star Wars and as deep as Lord of the Rings. I think it could rival every other superhero out there if explored, supported and executed right.

Geoff Johns

Green Lantern: Rebirth #1-6 (Johns, 2004-05) achieved the impossible by orchestrating a Silver Age renaissance of a superhero that had as convoluted a narrative legacy. An abbreviated [if not butchered] synopsis follows: Rebirth #1 ignites with the fourth GL in canon, Kyle Rayner, retrieving Jordan’s mint-condition corpse from the Earth’s sun. Rayner is on a secret mission for the long thought-dead Guardian, Ganthet, who seeks to re-establish the Green Lantern Corps. Meanwhile, Jordan’s Spectre manifestation is continually reappearing to his friends and family, namely fellow GLs/Justice Leaguers’ John Stewart, Guy Gardner, and former love interest Carol Ferris.

Jordan himself experiences a crisis of conscience amidst an internal battle between his soul, the Spectre, and his villainous persona Parallax. In Rebirth #4, it is revealed that Parallax...
was an interstellar poltergeist of yellow-energy or fear-based origin, which possessed Jordan and controlled the atrocious actions that ultimately led to his death. Through his unwavering strength of will, Jordan [meta]physically separates himself from both the Parallax entity and the Spectre. Jordan is *reborn*, symbolically purging himself of his sins [and ill-fated stories]. Furthermore, it is *revealed* that Jordan’s original mentor and archenemy Sinestro was behind the Parallax possession, further absolving any trust issues that the superhero community [and readers] may hold toward Jordan. Hal once again cites his *Green Lantern Oath* joins forces with the newly reunited *GL Corps* and *Justice League*, and overcomes the immediate threat of evil in Parallax.

In the epilogue of *Rebirth #6*, Jordan sets out to rebuild his hometown of Coast City, simultaneously rebuilding his destroyed relationships with Carol, his family, and the Justice League.

*Elastic Continuity as a Rhetoric of Retcon Function in Rebirth*

*Green Lantern: Rebirth* is not only the return of Silver Age white male protagonist Hal Jordan, but also a rejuvenation of other lanterns’ Guy Gardner, John Stewart, and Kyle Rayner. Additionally, *Rebirth* services to reassemble the intergalactic *GL Corps*, reestablish the Guardians of the Universe, and ultimately the yin/yang re-introduction of arch-nemesis Sinestro. Johns’ narrative weaving in *Rebirth* is distinguished in that the heroes, villains, and supporting players each are tied closer together in purpose/origin/motivation, thus allowing their life stories to intersect one another’s respective narrative path (Duncan & Smith, 2009). However, in signifying the updated tropes of each character, Johns’ is both updating and reworking origins; otherwise known as deploying retroactive continuity. Continuity is a fundamental rhetorical tool for the majority of superhero narratives. Duncan and Smith (2009) acknowledged the
significance of continuity both “to express the intertextual link among separately published comics narratives” and as a central motif of the serial nature of comics, “as more and more comics are added to a series, and…related to one another, continuity continues to grow in complexity” (p. 191). Thus, the need for a writer to reboot or retcon certain elements, in an effort to simplify, reaffirm, and/or pursue new creative imaginings, accomplishes the serial nature of the form while paving new paths for superhero narratives.

As Rebirth begins, a spaceship driven by Earth’s current Lantern Kyle Rayner bursts out of the sun, returning from a secret mission to retrieve Hal Jordan’s corpse. The spaceship immediately crashes into a dessert landscape, with the crash and wreckage eerily resembling the Silver Age origin story in which the alien Abin Sur crashed into the desert before passing his ring onto Hal Jordan. Johns simultaneously deployed a narrative homage to origins past, while telling his present story, all the while laying groundwork for years of future stories. In their essay/chapter “I’m Not Fooled by that Cheap Disguise,” authors William Urrichio and Roberta Pearson (1991) commented on the elastic continuity in superhero narratives, as it relates to reader/audience identification. “The merest reference to the origin events activates an intertextual frame which insists upon the [character’s] motivation and key traits/attributes while permitting for variant elaboration…[and] restaging” (Urrichio and Pearson, 1991, p. 196). This concept of elastic continuity or elasticity is central to Rebirth because Johns’ secondary narrative goal is to reestablish the entire Green Lantern status quo. However, this status quo rebirthing employs a rhetorical lens as Johns’ narrative style simultaneously pays homage to the past, while telling stories in the present and laying groundwork for the future. Similar narrative steps are repeated as the Green Lantern universe is split open to include setups of key characters from GL historical
canon, like Green Arrow Oliver Queen and Jordan’s Silver Age love interest Carol Ferris, among others.

_Tensions and Elastic Flexibility: Rebirthing the Serial “Status Quo” of Green Lantern’s World_

Just as the status quo is maintained through the resurrection of Jordan and Sinestro, Johns reestablishes past stories and character relationships in Green Lantern’s world, adding emotional layers that serve as dramatistic tensions between characters and serialized narratives. Uricchio and Pearson (1991) explained that:

> Over the years, a process of uneven accentuation and development [of elasticity] has selectively foregrounded or downplayed certain aspects of the key components [of superheroes and their environments]. This process accounts for both the character’s containment and refraction, the elastic treatment of the character’s key components allowing his narrative undulations and, thus, his longevity. (p. 195)

In the case of Jordan, the people and places in his life become flexible tools to be adjusted to tell the best possible story. Jordan’s former love Carol reappears at Ferris Airfield, the air force base where Hal and Carol grew up watching their pilot fathers. Carol represents an emotional anchor, married but unmarred by age, despite the clear insinuation that Jordan has been dead for several years (Johns, 2004). Johns even explained Jordan’s gray-streaked hair [during the 80s and 90s] had always been a hidden symbol of the Parallax infection, which is one of several steps taken to remove any sign of aging from Jordan’s persona (Morse, 2005).

In _Rebirth_, Jordan’s relationship with the Justice League offers a mixed history of themes as explored through a dialogue between Batman and Martian Manhunter (Johns, 2004). Batman doubts Jordan’s righteous intentions as fragments of Coast City begin to mysteriously reappear. Martian Manhunter sees the reemergence of Coast City as an attempt at redemption while Batman purveys his distrust. John Stewart interrupts Batman in defense of Jordan, asserting that
Batman resents Jordan because Hal is a “man without fear” (Johns, 2005d, p. 27). The significance of Stewart’s comments about the relationship between Batman’s central motif, fear, and Jordan’s lack of fear, highlights an additional dialectic tension between superhero ideologies.

Batman acknowledges the dual nature of Jordan’s return and laments, “The real Hal Jordan is back. And he’s bringing the past with him” (Johns, 2004d, p. 28). Indeed the past actions of the heroes, the past stories of Green Lantern and the Justice League, continue to provide an elastic continuity for writers and readers that is central to the emotional tensions and operatic drama that sustains superhero narratives over long periods of time. Upon his return to Earth in the final chapter of Rebirth, Jordan is physically protested again by Batman (Johns, 2005e). In response, Jordan drops Batman to the ground with one sharp blow to the jaw (Johns, p. 3). Punching Batman in defile, Jordan physically and metaphorically reestablishes his ideological stronghold of physical might over the agency of fear, regardless of its motivation. Jordan’s action also demonstrates the emotional layers and tensions provided by the inclusion of elastic threads of continuity (Uricchio & Pearson, 1991). I might posit Johns’ is communicating to the fandom his personal preference for the Silver Age heroes, like Jordan, and the potential changing-of-the-guard from Batman’s popular grim and gritty reputation to the current Silver Age renaissance occurring at DC.

Johns not only reached into the Silver Age of Green Lantern’s history, but also establishes his own foundational plot threads for the future of GL mythology. The villain Black Hand plays a small role in the first issue of Rebirth. This throwaway villain from Lantern’s past is brought back as a plot device for demonstrating Jordan’s unstable condition as the Spectre. At the home of Oliver Queen, the Green Arrow, Black Hand blasts his way into the mansion in search of Jordan’s former power ring (Johns, 2004, p. 12). Mia, Green Arrow’s current
sidekick exclaims, “Black who?” following Ollie’s cornering of Hand (Johns, p. 14). Arrow replies, “One of Lantern’s old losers,” (Johns, p. 14) immediately establishing a vague elastic history for the character’s reemergence. As Green Arrow corners Hand in his basement where the power ring is hidden, Jordan appears in Spectre form to seemingly aid in Hand’s apprehension. Arrow hollers to Jordan in classic superhero banter, “Hal?!...Hold on…Let’s cuff Black Hand and we can go talk” (Johns, p. 14). Jordan responds that he would prefer nothing more, but as he transforms into the Spectre, he reveals, “that’s not what I’m here to do” (Johns, p. 14). The Spectre proceeds to melt off the Black Hand’s right hand, in a twisted form of justice and visual literation.

In this single page of *Rebirth*, Johns is able to establish past continuity, employ past continuity to propel the emotional and physical action of the present story, and lay a foundation for future plot threads. Johns completed Hand’s role in *Rebirth* within the confines of six pages, but Johns also deliberately reestablished a villain whose role would expand in *Green Lantern* over the next six years, culminating in DC Comics largest event, the Green Lantern-centered *Blackest Night* (2009-10). Thus, Johns established his own elastic continuity that he intended to pick up and use at some point in the future. Johns also recognizes the McGuffin22 that exists as *history between heroes and villains* (Uricchio & Pearson, 1991), and is able to create specific environments that provide these emotional tensions between characters. Additionally, Johns’ recognition and execution of the superhero McGuffin of rich history between characters serves the ultimate goal of DC Comics through continued serialization and commoditization of their properties.
The Need for Superhero Reboots:
Rebirth as a Modern Comic Book Rite of Passage

Jordan’s redemption in Rebirth signifies an important postmodern rule of thumb for comic book superheroes, namely brand endurance. This brand endurance is polysemic in that the characters themselves are as important to their fantasy universes as the characters as commodities are to the corporate continuance of capital gain. The polysemic synergy of consumer commodity is thus reliant on the narrative quality of characters to abide by certain rules of seriality. In his essay “Two of a Kind,” Lou Anders ascribed the interlocked nature between Batman and the Joker (Anders, 2008). Anders posited Joker as the one figure able to both comprehend Batman’s methodology, i.e., superhero code, and challenge his twisted morality. “Just like Batman, the Joker has something to prove. Their motivations are locked like opposite poles of a magnet” (Anders, 2008, p. 32). As Anders demonstrated the significance for Joker’s existence as mirrored-other and balancing beam for Batman’s sanity, Jordan’s Green Lantern needs his consistent arch-nemesis to exist in the guise of former-Green Lantern Sinestro.

Sinestro highlights the strengths of Jordan’s superhero willpower by exhibiting an unabashed use of his power ring to the point of suppression and fascism. By wielding his yellow, fear-infused power ring, Sinestro’s actions created a demonstrative contrast of how pivotal Jordan’s will power must be used for good. Thus, when Jordan lost the will power to resist permanent conflict-resolution, he broke the cycle between hero and villain. Jordan became the evil Parallax following the destruction of the aforementioned Coast City, his new persona broke the neck of Sinestro in 1994’s Emerald Twilight storyline (Marz, 1994). In a parallel metaphor, Jordan also broke the superhero code and became irreparable and thus irredeemable to the superhero community. The writers were forced into a situation where Jordan’s character must face an inevitable death or chastise the narrative code of existence that both superhero stories and
consumer/readers operated under. This storyline of the *Gimmick Age* represented a duality of problems with comic book storytelling in the 90s. Thus, the only viable solution to the problem would service through the comic book framing of an inevitable retcon.

*Arch Nemesis Sinestro as Balancing the Trope Act of Seriality*

Rhetorically, Johns achieved multiple objectives with the retcon of the Parallax plot device. One of central mainstay to restore Green Lantern to superhero status quo is the resurrection of Sinestro as Jordan’s arch nemesis. Throughout Hal’s Green Lantern history, “Sinestro is his Lex Luthor, his Joker, his Reverse Flash” (Morse, 2005, p. 62). Jordan and Sinestro are locked in the same kind of yin and yang aspect as Batman is to the Joker (Uricchio & Pearson, 1991, p. 199). The importance of flexibility and the elasticity of continuity are crucial to the Jordan-Sinestro relationship. Sinestro originated as a member of the Green Lantern Corps, and played a significant role in the selection and training of Jordan as a GL (Dougall, 2004). Coogan (2006) identifies this form of villain as the “inverted-superhero supervillain, [differentiated] from other types of supervillain [because] they can become superheroes” (Coogan, 2006, p. 72).

It could also be noted that Jordan qualified in the inverted-superhero supervillain subgroup during his tenure as Parallax. In addition, during this distinct period the Guardians released Sinestro from imprisonment in order to fight the evil Jordan. As both an ironic twist and a deliberate retcon by Johns, Kyle Rayner revealed that Sinestro was responsible for awakening the yellow demon Parallax from within the Central Power Battery, which lead to the demise of Jordan (Johns, 2005b; 2005c). Thus, Johns uses the postmodern employment of flexible retroactive continuity in orchestrating the yin and yang relationship between Sinestro and Jordan,
and reinforces their interlocked battle and dependence on each other’s existence (Uricchio & Pearson, 1991). The resurrection of these two key characters in *Rebirth* is the most significant aspect of realigning the status quo of the Green Lantern mythos.

Specifically, the mythological renaissance of Sinestro is critical to the rhetorical success of relationships in *Green Lantern*. Coogan (2006) identified the hero/villain relationship as pivotal. “Supervillains relate to their heroes in a number of ways, through self worth, as archenemies, as dopplegangers, in Oedipal parings, as displacement of the hero’s personality, and in rogue’s galleries” (p. 97). Sinestro not only embodies the inverted superhero role, but he also satisfies each of the rhetorical needs of the superhero. Second, Jordan needs Sinestro as an equal to validate his journey and reify his self-worth. Third, as a former GL member Sinestro serves as a dobbleganger that fourth, satisfies an Oedipal role for Jordan, as Sinestro once served as mentor to a fatherless Jordan. Fifth, Sinestro exists as a fascist displacement of Jordan’s personality as he is willing to do what it takes to secure justice [i.e., kill]. Sixth, Sinestro’s culminating efforts to create his own Corps army in Johns’ 2007 follow-up *Sinestro Corps War*, officially enacts a rouges gallery worthy of elevating the status of Green Lantern-as-narrative superhero and *Green Lantern*-as-commodity to levels that rival top DCU characters like Superman and Batman.

The significance of an expanded rouges gallery for any hero is pivotal to determining the long-range viability a superhero property has in commanding vast arraying of continuity-related tie-ins. How many episodes would the Emmy-winning *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992) have lasted without the Joker, Riddler, Penguin, Two-Face, Clayface, Catwoman, Ra’s al Ghul, Man-Bat, Killer Croc, Madhatter, etc.? In many ways, the supporting cast in a superhero’s world excites fan readership and commodity culture as much as the hero. The villain pool depth
cements the storytelling power for cartoons, movie franchises, action figures, and countless memorabilia. Additionally, Johns’ recognition and execution of the superhero McGuffin of rich history between characters serves the ultimate goal of DC Comics through continued serialization and commoditization of their properties. Over time, assembling a rogue’s gallery for the hero complements the mythos ability to accumulate a serial continuity. Duncan and Smith (2009) specified, “what makes continuity so rewarding is, in part, its value as a commodity for the exchange of meaning among fans” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 191). Pustz (1999) contended, “fans seem to particularly enjoy these kinds of series…information based on continuity becomes the source of discussion, jokes, and arguments, making it the raw material for the interactive glue that holds comic book culture together” (p. 134).

Accordingly, writer Geoff Johns unfolded a superhero narrative with the polysemic duties of telling a great superhero story, reestablishing the Green Lantern universe of characters for both new and old readers, retconning or re-interpreting the storyline(s) that broke Jordan’s serial value as both commodity and character to the greater DCU. In an effort to clearly delineate through these multiple moves, the following subsections will tackle each of the major achievements at work through Rebirth, both in and out of the narrative story. Examination of Rebirth’s in-story and commodity narratives will reveal the crosshair intersection of Burke’s critique of art under capitalism with Turner’s ritualization of flow as a liminoid possibility of leisure capitalism to create possibilities within commodities to enact an aesthetic identification in culture.
Geoff Johns as a Rhetorician of Retcon, and the Liminoid Functions of Commodity Capitalism

*Geoff Johns and the Rhetorical Style of Superhero Narratives*

My approach in comic books, and this should be evident with things like Justice Society of America and Booster Gold, I believe that there are no so-called D-list characters. There are just D-list stories and D-list takes. They're all A-list, but it just depends on how you present them.

*Geoff Johns*

Geoff Johns begat an early career in entertainment that included working as personal assistant to the director of *Superman: The Movie* (1978) and the *Lethal Weapon* franchise, Richard Donner. Johns gained entrance into comic book storytelling with lesser-known properties like *Stars and S.T.R.I.P.E* before experiencing popularity with DC’s updated version of the *Justice Society of America*. Since his emergence as a perennial critical and fan favorite, Johns’ superhero writing duties have included but are not limited to: *JSA*, *Teen Titans*, *Flash*, *Green Lantern: Birth*, *Green Lantern vol. 4* (ongoing), *Action Comics*, and a plethora of mini-series and mega-events. Johns’ superhero writing has also translated into TV work, writing for Cartoon Network’s *Justice League Unlimited* and three popular episodes for The WB/CW’s Superman soap opera, *Smallville* (2001).

Johns’ superhero narrative style is notorious for communicating deep characterizations that resonate with fans. In *Wizard’s* 2009 fan-favorite article, Kiel Phegley (2009) asserted the following introduction to Johns’ work in 2008: “From revitalizing the Justice Society as the training camp for generations of future heroes to reigniting interest in Hal Jordan as the one, true Green Lantern, Johns proved the master of unraveling confusing continuity and spinning it into unparalleled character work” (Phegley, 2009, p. 50). Johns’ narrative style employs both a quality and quantity that cohesively blends with comic book commodities. Barry Brummett (2008) avouched the power of style and its tight association to commodities:
“Capital creates systems of meaning for commodities that hold together both markets and societies. A number of scholars observe that markets and cultures are becoming the same thing—
*style* is a major instrument of both commodification and culture” (p. 56). Effectively, the allure of Johns’ narrative style, his ability to engage retcon as a rhetorically stylistic device for meeting the consumer qualification of comic continuity and seriality, while at the same time reinterpreting and tweaking character origins in an effort to both update and tell his own stories, postulates his status as master comic book rhetorician of the superhero genre form.

Johns also executes meticulous planning toward future ideas and series, thus creating a caveat inhabiting past, present, and future content into his narrative tropes. Thus, Johns’ narrative style bestows the kind of commodity power that captures audience attention, trains consumer expectations, and heightens corporate intake. According to this new theory of a rhetoric of retcon, or *rhetcon*, a writer must impose of these aforementioned qualities. Johns’ style is reflexive, post-Modern in its blend of nostalgia for the Silver Age, breaking the rules of the superhero form, and bludgeoning readers with post-9/11 deconstructionist retcons, and shock-and-aw serial cliffhangers. This *rhetcon* strategy maximizes reader potential, and consumer profitability, by extending relat-ability to multiple generations of readers, while inviting non-traditional fans into the community. Thus, Johns’ style invites the largest audience possible to enter a liminiod consumership, in which they are actively able to experience *flow* or here specifically, *superhero flow*.

*Understanding the Power of Audiences through a Theory of Rhetcon*

As stated, a *retcon* signifies an author or publisher decision to take a character property or history and retroactively change the story’s narrative dynamics to update characters or revise
their histories. Understanding a theory of retcon signifies a proper academic shift toward not only the understanding of these retcons as historical revisionism, but also to highlight the rhetorical dynamics of navigating competing audiences and purposes to balance demands as both graphic art and commodity. “Rhetcon” signifies an acute balancing act between the tensions of artistic vision [i.e., the writer, creative freedom, Burke’s concern for pure art], and the corporate limitations prescribed by the rules of branded properties marketed as serial commodities [i.e., the capitalist tension that companies cannot allow artistic freedoms to change comic book properties so drastically that they either become unrecognizable to the larger consumer audience or endanger copyright for intellectual property ownership]. There has always existed a certain level of fan participation or involvement in the creative process. The imperative extension of a new term in rhetcon, allows for the separation of the former retcon. Rhetcon constitutes the independent behavior of writers, as both liminoid creators and fans, to strategically balance their narrative responsibilities between the demands of fandom and the rules of commodity capitalism. Due to the technological achievements that continue to enable growth of the voice of fans, writers and editors become more respondent or reactionary than ever.

Retroactive continuity is compelling to this discussion because of the retcon’s power to break form and initiate an occupational psychosis among audience communities. Brummett (2008) noted, “cultural commodities are catalyst...they are building blocks of culture” (Brummett, 2008, p. 63). In effect, fans have a trained incapacity for the established tropes of decades of storytelling. Consequently, when publishers’ mess with the established form in ways that challenge the preferred norms, occupational psychosis escalates to levels in which the distinct action and awareness engaging readers toward Superhero flow is broken. A breaking of the aesthetic flow experience thus heightens the potential for capital decrease. Regarding this
emphasis on occupational psychosis relating to the commodity argument, these narratives cannot
close, but on the flip side of this loop the fandom contributes and comments on expectations;
creating an atmosphere of co-constitutive behavior between demands for art and capital. Due to
the hypersensitive relationship between the artistic and capitalistic tensions of superhero comics,
the discussion of alternative forms of graphic literature in chapter 4 is warranted.

The Rebirth of a Commodity: Entering Liminoid Capitalism

Increasingly, comic book companies see themselves in the character-licensing business (at the very least) and perhaps even more specifically in the filmed entertainment industry.

McAllister, Gordon, & Jancovich

Burke (1973) purported that art cannot exist under capitalism without some propaganda element. In the case of modern comic book properties, this cannot be further from the truth. The successful execution of Rebirth unleashed a commercial assault on the comic book community. Rebirth not only resurrected Hal Jordan, but also resurrected the Green Lantern series. Green Lantern #1 arrived in the spring of 2005, and has recently celebrated shipment of its 50th issue [since Rebirth and Johns’ 2005 GL reboot]! In coinciding with Green Lantern, DC Comics’ launched a secondary title, Green Lantern Corps, which follows the happenings of the entire galactic peace keeping police force of Lanterns. In tandem, the popularity of these two books have spawned consumer interest and driven up character interest for DC. Multiple waves of Green Lantern-based collectibles have been distributed, including: multiple series of high-dollar action figures, buttons and pens detailing Lantern symbolism, T-shirts, and inevitably, life-size Green Lantern power rings. Corresponding these successful marketing ventures, DC/Warner released a feature length animated movie Green Lantern: First Flight in the summer of 2009, as a tie-in to the current comic book success, as well as a testing tool for the larger viewing
audience. In accordance with the success of *First Flight*, as well as *Green Lantern*’s surge to the top of the comic book charts in 2009\textsuperscript{32}, Warner Brothers has been in methodical production to crossover *Green Lantern*’s appeal to the largest audience yet, via the launching of a potential studio tent-pole franchise of *Green Lantern* movies.

To quip there lacks a propaganda element in DC’s/WB’s setup of *GL* as the next big superhero icon is foolhardy. The linear tracing of marketing/advertising and franchising is clear. However, Johns’ style has played the heaviest role in forming this cultural movement. Brummett (2008) averred, “there is a connection between the values inherent in style’s social categorizing and style’s centrality in capitalism” (Brummett, 2008, p. 56). Brummett’s observation helps to close the gap between the aesthetic sensations of artistic style and the commodity fetishes of late capitalism. Of course, Hollywood exists as a bottom-line first, dream factory industry. In effect, Warner and DC have clear intentions in profiteering their characters for mass audiences/consumers. However, audiences choose their participation, acceptance or rejection, and their liminoid decisions so far vote that *GL* functions as an artistic aesthetic with the capability and culpability to excite a consumer-flow experience (Turner, 1988). Whether indoctrination by capitalistic form or consumer lottery luck, the argument pontificates centralizing Geoff Johns’ authorship of and audience response to *Green Lantern: Rebirth* as the perennial consumer culture rhetorical pillar of *superhero flow*; both eliciting a flow aesthetic akin to Turner’s treatment of the term\textsuperscript{33}, and *Rebirth*’s cultural deployment within the dynamic of Burke’s propagandictic problematic concerning art under capitalism. Under a system of capitalism, it is neither capable nor necessary nor realistic for consumer audiences to lay down possessions and live out a sequestered lifestyle of rural isolation, sans the Burkean model of retirement\textsuperscript{34} (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2001). No, consumers enact a liminoid exercise of high/low culture participation,
efforting toward cope-ability, engaging in a brand-market society of superhero commodity culture. Brummett (2008) maintained, “The idea of branding demonstrates the integral link…between commodity and culture, for ‘the brand is…catalyst, the filament of platinum that makes culture and marketing combine’” (p. 58). To contravene Burke’s method, the answer lies not in the rejection of capitalistic systems of somatic pleasure, but in identification toward these systems, so that audience involvement can remain a democratically informed choice or selection of aesthetic.

The Signification of Rebirth

A concluding thought toward the significance of Rebirth as a necessary exemplar of rhetorical analysis looks to the title and central theme itself, rebirth. Why is it important to return Hal Jordan to the status quo of comics’ continuity? Why is Green Lantern, historically a second-tier hero, the choice character to carry the torch of significance for DC? Burke communicated a systematic cycle of humanity, in which people repetitiously perform stages of guilt, victimage, and purification. This cycle constitutes the human consciousness willingness and/or need to purge any wrongdoing in an effort of self-medicine for the soul. Following this theme of guilt or villainization, self-victimization by way of death, and ultimate purification via redemption or rebirth, the master narrative theme of Rebirth serves as a human metaphor for the ritual processes of cleansing the self. The symbolism of rebirth is at once personal, religious, and societal. Furthermore, Jordan’s return to the status quo and youth-like state rehabilitates the Western ideological obsession with youth or immortality. Sans the plastic surgery commodity culture of a society reimagining itself as a poseable androgynous action figure, Johns’ post-9/11 superhero narrative holds a mirror up to a fragmented America trying to identify itself; a culture
scrambling to maintain a sense of youthful *normalcy*, ideological dominance via [p]re(d)emptive violence, and perhaps the nostalgia of simpler times, when might *made* right.

The lesson of *Rebirth* reifies the Western cultural belief in oneself, individual fortitude, and the willpower to overcome any wrong, no matter the cost. Such a message of alpha-rightness would certainly reinforce any societal self-doubt lingering around 2004-05; especially at a time when privileged white males needed to maintain a status quo of willpower-fueled aggressive leadership. The fantasy message of *Rebirth* allows the status quo to resume; a status quo in which white male super(power)hero maintains a youthful focal point while enduring the distrust of the surrounding society at large. Johns’ myth seeks a return to Silver Age ideology of superheroes, black and white politics of Cold War America. The superhero flow of *Rebirth* attempts to soothe the aching politics of post-9/11 America, absence of governmental faith, the questioning of heroic motivations, and the need of a long-lasting commodity that can return the status quo of ideological tranquility at the small price of a monthly endowment at the local comic book store. The theoretical implications of the post-9/11 psyche in America is an important theme in discerning the messages of modern comic book/graphic novel storytelling, and pivotal in Turner’s flow as an answer to Burke’s art/capitalism vexation. This theme continues to be unpacked throughout chapter 4, as I juxtapose the nature of finite graphic novel storytelling as kairotic to post-9/11 capitalism, as it intersects comic book culture.

Concluding Thoughts and Looking Ahead

In sum, Geoff Johns’ 2004-05 mini-series reboot *Green Lantern: Rebirth* represents an unprecedented case study because it affords an opportunistic reflexivity to both the modes of narrative style that aesthetically engages audience reception and liminoid participation in comic
book seriality, as well as the satisfaction of commodity fetishmentation peddled by corporate capitalism. Green Lantern affords a diverse narrative history, rich in the diverse tropes of superhero mythos. Hal Jordan authenticates the superhero tropes and trappings of American ideology throughout the last half-century. *Green Lantern* scribe Geoff Johns manifests a narrative style that embraces the multifaceted levels of superhero seriality and corporate rules of capitalism and commodification. Johns’ narrative style balances the tensions and anxieties between the trained incapacities of fan expectations/reactions and the corporate hierarchies of capital gain for DC Comics, consummating in the kind of acclaimed storytelling that engages a unique aesthetic, or superhero flow, that suffices all parties. While Johns’ momentum cannot possibly last forever, present reaction from both parties demarcates an historic precedence into the current state of [quasi-]pure art under capitalism. Thus, *Rebirth* affords an opportunity for a bridge to exist between Burke’s unidentified literary aesthetic marker and Turner’s employment of a literary flow experience. In chapter 4, I further explore the concept of *graphic literature as equipment for living*, and explore the polyvalent nature of graphic novels as a space for the medicinal constitution of soma for readers, further bridging the theoretical contributions of Burke and Turner toward an aesthetic identification, with conclusions, limitations, and future considerations to consider in chapter 5.
CHAPTER 4

“Y NOW?” GRAPHIC LITERATURE AS EQUIPMENT FOR LIVING, POST-9/11 KAIROS, AND SOMATIC FLOW IN Y: THE LAST MAN

In review of analysis, in chapter 1 I established audience anxiety presented online during the public announcement of Disney’s acquisition of Marvel Entertainment. This corporate merger highlights the quandary of an occupational psychosis that challenges audience responses to big business ventures. Chapter 2 constituted attention toward the theoretical framework comprising selective works from Burke and Turner, with the aid of comics scholars like Scott McCloud, who position the internal aesthetic significance of the comic medium between the critiques of art under capital by Burke and the loose markers of flow by Turner. In chapter 2, I explored the theoretical contributions of Burke and Turner, which segued analysis into two distinct genres of the comic book medium in chapters 3 and 4.

In chapter 3, I highlighted the significant tropes of superhero narrative storytelling with regard to the character Green Lantern and introduced a theoretical extension of the term retroactive continuity to comprise a stronger critical function in the guise of a theory of rhetcon. This rhetcon helps facilitate an understanding between the occupational psychosis of the comic book community when the structures of capitalism interject with consumers’ trained incapacities. The tensions between the functions of comic book aesthetics is also of importance in that the co-constitutive nature of the form initiates a paradox of substance for audiences. The answer to this quandary revolving around the shaping and breaking of flow thus fuses into the theoretical arguments to be laid out in chapter 4, as Brian K. Vaughan’s limited series Y: The Last Man advances a more chiseled case study on the power of comics, or, graphic literature as equipment for living.
In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke (1973) began his essay on “Literature as Equipment for Living” by examining the linear use of English proverbs as sage advice passed down through the years: “You will note, I think, that there is no ‘pure’ literature here. [Rather], proverbs are designed for consolation or vengeance, for admonition or exhortation, for foretelling” (Burke, 1973, p. 293). Burke admitted his own shortcoming of the lofty expectations toward a puristic art. Instead, Burke settled for literature, and in the second unit of *Equipment*, Burke purported the question, “why not extend such analysis of proverbs to encompass the whole field of literature?” (Burke, p. 296). While Burke sought to expand the utility and scope of literary criticism, as an addendum for assisting society, I further posit that the consummation of graphic novels presents an extension of Burke’s notion. Burke (1973) admitted, “Art forms like ‘tragedy’ or ‘comedy’ or ‘satire’ would be treated as *equipments for living*, that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with the correspondingly various attitudes” (Burke, p. 304). Here Burke acknowledged the potential for continuing this trend, and even recognized the evolution of tastes and aesthetic forms. Thus, I theorize that the comic book medium presents a Burkean extension, whereby graphic literature similarly functions as postmodern *equipment for living*. The admonition of this finding constitutes a case study demonstration not only of the aesthetic abilities of graphic literature, but also the medicinal benefits to societal anxieties of the day.

This template for examining graphic literature as equipment for living composes the central theme of chapter 4. I examine the limited series *Y: The Last Man* (2002-08) as a central example of how literature functions in the guise of a liminoid flow aesthetic experience as well as a somatic medicine attuned for the primary group of comic consumers. I unpack this argument by first returning to Burke’s art/capital quandary, before further advocating the selective worth of
the graphic novel as a global commodity. Next, I revisit the central constructs of Turner’s ritual communitas and flow, and introduce the concept of soma. Then I unpack the specific utility of Brian K. Vaughan’s *Y: The Last Man*, and examine the certain kairos that affirmed *Y*’s social popularity and grassroots prosperity. Finally, I examine the theoretical implications of this argument and transition toward the larger projected discussions in chapter 5.

A Return to Burke’s Art/Capital Quandary as a Commentary on the Comic Book Market

“Pure” art is safest only when the underlying moral system is sound.

*Kenneth Burke*

Burke’s critique of art under capitalism in *Philosophy* (1941) acknowledged the flawed systematic definition of purity, when cast within or for the regime of capital gain. Within a capitalist setting, “integration between work-patterns and ethical patterns is constantly in jeopardy, and even frequently impossible” (Burke, 1973, p. 316). This unavoidable tension between creative freedom and capitalistic restraint mirrors a dominant political theme in the comic book industry. Historically, comic book companies maintained complete control of characters, stories, and properties distributed through their respective companies. Comic book distributors like Marvel and DC Comics owned the rights to the characters published under print label. This ownership allowed characters to be written, re-written, written-off or killed, resurrected, or worse, written badly. In addition to the unceasing availability of character properties to staff writers, editors, and artists, company properties endured commodified expansions into toy lines, cartoons, movies, and more. This character exploitation is capable of resonating iconic status, exhibited by Superman, Batman, and Spiderman to name a few. Conversely, limitless commercial restraint alienates intent of the author, as new stories inevitably
force compromise of intent and endanger the artistic integrity of originality. Burke (1973) foretold, “that under conditions of competitive capitalism there must necessarily be a large corrective or propaganda element in art” (Burke, p. 321)

Burke’s commentary warns of the tensions present when art and capital compete for space in culture. No single decade vanquished in the creative compromise of comic books characters like the 1990s. During the event decade, DC Comics broke Batman’s back and killed Superman, while Marvel announced that Spiderman had been an imposturous clone for the majority of his stories (Dougall, 2004; Wallace et al., 2006). During the most lucrative decade of commoditization for comic books, an evolutionary shift occurred in the mid-90s, which resulted from the emergence of Image Comics¹. Image Comics developed as a creator-owned company that allotted its writers and artists complete freedom and more importantly ownership over their respective creations and works (St-Louis, 2008). This shift to ownership of independent thoughts/creations in the industry expanded into commonplace as major publishers eventually conceded to the prospect of creator-owned properties. Currently, creator-owned properties are as popular as traditional superhero fare among recurring comic book readers, and as the medium broadens to include newer, smaller ideas, the collective and retail format has shifted sight in the public sphere with the induction of graphic novels.

*Global Virtue and the Rise of the Graphic Novel*

Graphic novels, or comic books collected in trade paperback form to comprise longer arched stories, represent a larger growing medium for traditionally male literary entertainment in America². Outside the United States, graphic novels represent diverse sites of importance. Japanese manga has grown into a crux of cultural creative expression, while manga as a
commodity serves one of the highest economic utilities in the Asian Pacific region. In 1995, over
$9 billion of manga was produced and 1.9 billion manga sold in Japan, an average of more than
15 manga per person (Schodt, n. d.). Before the success of Mange, 17th-century Japanese
artisans created unique wood-carved literature called Yomihan (Shiokawa, 1996). These
Yomihan stories often retold the fables of Buddhist monks, and served as a precursor to the
modern comic book (Shiokawa, 1996). The Indian expressionists employed comic books as a
means to educate middle class children of cultural ideologies central to traditional Indian beliefs
(Rao, 1996). In China, ancient folklore is revived in comics to provide socio-economical
commentaries of society (Liu-Langley & Langley, 1996).

In the United States, graphic novels have usurped traditional magazine-style comic books
in total sales beginning in 2005 (Grabios, 2007). Sales for graphic novels in North America
quintupled from 2001 to 2007 to $375 million annually (MacDonald, 2008). The 12% increase
from 2006 to 2007 was speculated as limited only by the lack of shelf space from major
bookstore chains (MacDonald, 2008). ComicBookResources, one of one the leading fansites
devoted to the medium, featured a decade in review roundtable for the 00’s from its lead
contributors. In the roundtable discussion, George Tramountanas acknowledged:

I can't pinpoint exactly when [the peek of graphic novels] happened, but it definitely
became more of the norm this decade…Along with the increase in cost of a monthly
issue and the availability of discounts for trades from online retailers, well, it just makes
sense that this is the way many folks go - including me! (Tramountanas, 2010)

The evolution of comics to illustrated novels suggests a rise in the sophistication and recognition
of comics as an important literary medium. I posit that a key source of significance to the success
or failure of creator-owned titles specifically, lies in comics authors’ ability to tell narrative
stories balanced between the conscious and unconscious aesthetic consumption, the real and
fantastic, the comic and tragic, culminating in an audience/readership construct Victor Turner
posed as flow (Turner, 1988). In this chapter, I intend to build an argument framing the flow
(Turner, 1988) of the graphic novel Y: The Last Man, which acts as a kind of soma (Huxley,
1932) for readers, a polyvalent coping mechanism for the perceived decline of white male
privilege in America while serving under the guise of fantasy narrative. Concurrently, these
medicinal benefits of Y will explain its resonance with readers, the word of mouth power of the
books’ popularity, and the important kairos of the series’ publication.

The Ritual Experiences of Communities and Flow

Ritual, Communitas, and Flow Revisited

Proper recognition of flow acknowledges the association of the term as related to ritual
and communitas. Turner (1982, 1988) recognized the existence of flow in contention with
experiences of ritual and communities where, “communitas exists as a kind of ‘figure-ground’
relationship with social structure” (Turner, 1982, p. 50). Turner averred to the inclusive nature of
communitas, which has the capability to erupt spontaneously within groups of people (Turner,
1982). Spontaneous communitas occurs in specific ritual circumstances where the possibility of
shared positive reaction culminates in a heightened experience or flow. Thus, while flow is not
guaranteed to result from the strategic or specific gathering of groups or persons in commonality,
the existence of communitas shared between them can be an important catalyst in facilitating
flow. For example, a theater of patrons gather to indulge in a venue of entertainment, and the
spontaneous communitas occurring may ignite an experience of flow if the circumstances allot
for its development.

Flow precipitates internally when action and awareness merge to form a holistic
sensation (Turner, 1988). Turner (1988) maintained, “we act with total involvement, a state in
which action follows action according to an internal logic, with no apparent need for conscious intervention on our part” (p. 54). Thus, flow is an enlightened state of being that can result from shared communitas with others or in accordance with amplified individual engagement. In the example of a theater, the audience positive reaction to their experience enacts a kind of flow, where everything comes together at once. The movie or play delivers the right cultural chords that vibrate the public consciousness, and everything associable becomes germane. The co-patrons in the audience, the performance of the actors, the indulgences of specific snacks, everything becomes linked toward a process of ritual based on excited togetherness ignited from experiencing flow.

Despite the atmosphere of generation, flow is ultimately an internal emotional experience. “Flow is made possible by a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field, by means of framing, bracketing, and usually a set of rules” (Turner, 1988, p. 54). Thus, when an audience does not fully understand the rules that constitute flow, they ritualize every aspect of their surrounding in an effort toward recapturing the [temporary] sensation. However, Turner (1988) averred, “flow perhaps elicits or ‘seduces out’ the unconscious levels of the self” (Turner, p. 55). The audience is witness and/or participant in behavior or ritual that may not normally afford to daily routine of the physical or spiritual. The bizarre viewing of foreign settings in movies or the burlesque voyeurism of performance art, or even the fantastic journey into the post-apocalyptic landscape of mankind’s future through literature exists as creative areas of play for the mind. There may be aspects and characteristics that are familiar, but these distinct narrative examples excite unique and wondrous experience from the imagination, which is central to the facilitation of flow.
Comic Shop Communitas

The whole brain activity that is activated by reading comic books is what provides the comic book experience; a fulfilling fantasy involvement with the printed page that one gets from no other media.

Rick Veitch, Cartoonist

*Y: The Last Man* represents a canvas in literature where the specifics of creator-owned and controlled authorship over a narrative property, and the cultural climate of post-9/11 society, synthesized a form of communitas and flow in the public sphere. Comic book shops exude a commercialized aura for customers, imposing ceiling-high stocked impressions akin to a public library with the visceral imagery of artists teasing out the male gaze of consumers from the moment they walk in the door. Comic book stores exist as an independent state, complete with their own national language of fantasy terminology, a hierarchy of readership literacy, and a currency comprising book collections, writer/artist wherewithal, and pull-list credit (Brown, 1997). Holbrook employed the term *play value* to describe a sense of fun displayed by video game users. (Chou & Ting, 2003). For comic book readers, the ritualization of entering this state of play exhibits a strong sense of communitas, facilitated historically through male gaze-provoked art, rampant shoptalk about the latest news, and the inevitable spending of capital; a spending that in and of itself nationalizes customers into the community and indoctrinates them into the brotherhood of the read.

While comic book stores demonstrate a sphere for spontaneous [capitalist] communitas, flow experience from comic book reading is more likely to occur in an intimate setting. Audiences likely read at any number of venues from lunch breaks at work to red lights while driving [unfortunately], but for the specification of flow enhancing, the primary domain for readers is in isolation or an area promoting limited distraction. Flow is not an endemic guarantee when reading comic books as there is always the risk of any negative criteria including but
hardly limited to: bad writing, poor craftsmanship of the artwork, outside distractions, reader disassociation, hunger, thirst, bowel necessitation, etc. On the contrary, scrupulous ritualization may solicit optimum experience: minimal distractions, comfortable seating, climate control, and ample time available. One final importance warns that no matter what conditions are presented to reflect or refract a state of flow, readers ultimately engage in a liminoid experience prior to their invested aesthetic. However, neither the positive nor negative rituals can counter the central warrant of reader/flow experience, text and context.

Author, Text, and Scholarship Constituting Y: The Last Man

Brian K. Vaughan

_Y: The Last Man_ changed my life. When I pitched it I was living on a friend’s couch in Manhattan…I’d made the decision, it’s either this or I’ll just leave comics.

Brian K. Vaughan

Brian K. Vaughan is the author of _Y: The Last Man_ (2002-2008). A writer for several successful comic books including _Ex-Machina, Runaways_, and the female-friendly _Buffy: Season 8_ continuation, Vaughan also served as a staff writer for the popular TV show _Lost_ during Seasons 3, 4, and 5. Vaughan is the recipient of three Eisner awards, the comic book equivalent of the Oscars or Emmys, for his work on _Y_ and other titles (Albert, n.d.). The trade paperback collections of _Y_ have consistently sold in the top 100 graphic novels over the last five years. In 2007, all nine of the _Y_ trades in publication ranked within the top 100 best selling books (Albert, 2008).

Introduction to the Premise of Y: The Last Man

_Y_ is a limited series distributed by DC Comics mature-label imprint Vertigo, which
shipped monthly from July 2002 to January 2008. *Y* is the story of the last man on earth, following a modern day plague that destroys “every last sperm, fetus, and fully developed mammal with a Y chromosome” (Vaughan, 2008, p. 39). The story poses the dilemma of a world without men. What would the world look like if over “95% of all commercial pilots, truck drivers, and ship captains died… [as well as] 92% of all felons… [and] 99% of all mechanics, electricians, and construction workers?” (Vaughan, p. 39). Set in the not-too-distant past/present following the plague, the central protagonist Yorick is a typical white male slacker and wannabe magician. His sardonic attitude toward situations is more attuned to Benwell’s theory of *New Sexism* (Benwell, 2007). Yorick lives with his untrained pet monkey Ampersand, while the women in his life inhabit progressive careers and lifestyle choices.

Yorick’s mother is a Democratic Representative for Congress. The first panel of her appearance storyboards her exit from the capital before the plague. Her chief aid is a put-together black man in a suit, holding an umbrella over her head, (Vaughan, 2008, p. 12). Despite her progressive stance throughout her narrative arc, this demonstration of female dominance is prevalent from the opening pages. Yorick’s would-be fiancé Beth is on a research sabbatical in the Australian Outback. Vaughan’s introduction of Beth posits her in a freeing set of hiking gear as she wades through the Outback on her own liberating quest for self-discovery (Vaughan, 2008, p. 9). Beth’s female journey mirrors the hero quest often reserved for male characters in literature⁶. The only hindrance to her naturalistic freedom is the cell phone conversation she is concurrently holding with Yorick (Vaughan, p. 9-11). During this conversation, Yorick, as helpless escape artist, dangles upside down from his doorframe, bound with a straight jacket of his own inducing. Yorick complains of the strained job market. His inability to tread water foreshadows both the chaos to come, and the competitive catalyst of man-made democracy/
capitalism. The symbolism of Yorick and Beth’s physical status in the opening pages juxtaposes the rigidity of form and structure and boundaries enforced by men, versus the free-spirited quest of feminine power.

Y’s supporting cast additionally includes Yorick’s relationship-challenged sister who is aptly named Hero. After the plague kills off all of the men, Hero joins a feminine power group known as the Amazons (Vaughan, 2008, p. 108). These extreme feminists despise man and see his departure from the earth as a justice. Further embodiment of their feminist creed includes the removal of the right breast as a sign of loyalty and disregard toward the male gaze (Vaughan, 2008). The self-mutilation narrative device serviced to escalate the intensity of the story while paying homage to the mythic Amazons of Greek lore. Meanwhile, the unique circumstances surrounding Yorick’s mysterious survival of the unknown plague draws him into a multicultural journey of survival and self-discovery. A black female government agent named 355 is assigned to protect Yorick and escort him to the laboratories of a cloning bio-physicist, Dr. Allison Mann. During his journey to meet Dr. Mann and ultimately find his girlfriend, Yorick encounters a reflection of reverse culture and society experiencing tension between tradition and post-apocalyptic life.

Solitary in his gender role, Yorick is trapped amongst a culture war. However, he is no culture warrior. Yorick’s own bloviations further inundate a mundane sarcasm of self-deprecating pop culture rhetoric. Yorick employs the kind of pop-referencing vernacular accommodating the energy drink-guzzling, Ritalin forced, cyber junkie patrons of comic fandom. Also, Vaughan’s use of pop culture referential schtick facilitates a narrative atmosphere of intertextual images. This intertextuality invites readers to identify with Yorick, the lost protagonist, because after all, aren’t most white young males lost in a sea of techno-progressive
media overkill, seeking identity one purchase at a time, betwixt and between trips to the 7-11 and Gamestop, but not before grabbing a bag full of BK Stackers on the way home. Vaughan posits Yorick as an everyman, the a-typical young white outcast that incidentally is unworriedly vital to the continuation of humanity… “Pwnd!”

Each of Vaughan’s females characterizes layers synthesizing (and for comic books redefining) feminine beauty and masculine strength. This is a stark departure from traditional comic book fair. Specifically, traditional superhero narratives focus on a masculine approach, such as the damsel in distress. In addition, when female superheroes join the fray, artistic emphasis tends to betray any characterization for ample illustrations steeped in accentuating the male gaze. While the catalogue of female representation in comic books continues to grow, the gap between quantity and quality still resides.

The [Former] State of Women in Comics

*Literature Review: Female Graphic Literary Scholarship*

Traditionally in American comics, females are typecast, sexually exploited, or underrepresented in the medium. Female characters in comic books serve a substantially subversive role in male-oriented narratives. Moffatt and Norton’s (2005) critical analysis of *Archie* revealed instances where children inadvertently acknowledged themes of sexualized women and female subversion to traditional heterosexual norms (Moffatt & Norton, 2005). During the Golden Age of comics throughout WWII, Wonder Woman appeared to stand as a symbol of freedom and patriotism. However, her patriotic representation masked an effort to sponsor institutionalized masculinity and promotion of contained or concealed feminine power, in addition to heady promotion of the male gaze (Emad, 2006).
In the critically acclaimed graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, 2002), a female version of Robin is introduced for the first time. Unfortunately, this Robin is consistently subjected through her masculine appearance and constant comparison to former male Robins (Tipton, 2008). Furthermore, Tipton noted that this female character serves no greater purpose than to distract readers from otherwise homoerotic pages of superhero narrative and artwork (Tipton, 2008). When female characters receive softer feminine characterization in graphic novels, their representation often comes in the form of bleak and sorrowful narratives. In *Daddy’s Girl*, (Drechsler, 1996) women’s issues are treated with respect and tenderness, albeit through narratives that portray young girls as objects of incestuous submission (Micciche, 2004). While each of these scholars highlight unique insight into female characterization, the underrepresentation of scholarship focusing on female characters in graphic novels represents a specific gap in literature worthy of analysis.

*The Pure Art of Pia Guerra*

In addition to being credited as co-creator of *Y: The Last Man*, Pia Guerra\(^9\) served as the artist throughout the entire run of *Y*. The choice for Guerra is no coincidence. In addition to being one of very few female artists in the industry, Guerra brings an elegant level of realism to her illustrations. The character 355 necessitates a clear physicality in her role as guardian and protector of Yorick. Yet instead of muscular vanes and skin-tight spandex, Guerra illustrates 355’s strength without compromising an authentic representation of the black female body: graceful yet bold, feminine yet tough. The synthesized characterizations of Vaughan’s narrative and Guerra’s artwork comprise a polyvalent temperament that neither literature nor film can resonate.
Uniquely, *Y: The Last Man* dignifies a greater opportunity to examine more than female and male characterization in graphic novels. Vaughan (2008) orchestrates a polyvalent narrative that posits an unsettling gender reversal of roles between male and female characters. This gender reversal acts as a form of *techne* by the author. Robert Johnson and Frances Ranney see *techne* as "an inventively systematic knowledge that [is] aimed toward previously thought-out, but not pre-determined, ends" (Hawk, 2004, p. 239). Comparably, the polyvalent nature of *Y* is parallel to this understanding of *techne* as a narrative tool. In addition to the role-reversal fantasy narrative that services what this author might pose as a surface theme, *Y* as a polyvalent text, which also distributes specific subversive commentaries critical to the post-9/11 climate or context regarding masculine power, politics, etc. Specifically, the subversive list of themes include metaphors for multiculturalism, the power shift for females in America, and the loss of white male privilege through the final straw of the Bush Administration. Thus, I argue that together the surface and subversive themes of *Y* comprised to form a narrative flow for readers, while the text itself serve as a form of *soma* to the post 9/11 climate.

**Soma, Save Me! The Lineage of Soma**

In previous chapters, I alluded to the inclusion of *soma* as an addressing force to the nature of the polyvalent power of the comic book medium. Bringing this concept into this project is critical to understanding the potential values of comic aesthetics as well as counter-motives to Burke’s art/capital quandary. The issue of comics as escapist entertainment brings up interesting discrepancies of how Turner loosely identified flow and Burke addressed literature as equip for living. Comics are often accused as escapist entertainment/ritual participation/etc., but balancing this argument against Burke’s account as equipment for living creates a disjuncture. Thus, I want
to use this ancient form of soma that has functioned as an either/or term, whether referencing a
sleep-inducing drugs or medicine of the gods or most poignantly as a utopianic answer in *Brave
New World* (Huxley, 1932). These examples will help demonstrate the aesthetic paradox of
substance afforded in graphic literature.

The term soma evokes several connotations derivative of the Vedic religion. Jayaram V
(2009) asserted soma translated to a drink of the gods and/or the god of inspiration, Deva (V,
2009). The most familiar association perhaps from Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel *Brave New
World* (1932). In the novel, soma is a recreational if not mandated dream-inducing drug.
Characters took soma as a method of escapism from the stresses and monotonies of everyday
life. Soma “is employed by the government as a method of control through pleasure”
(Answers.com, 2009). Partaking in regular use of soma is commonplace in *Brave New World*,
and it is used in compliment with situations including: sex, relaxation, concentration, confidence,
etc. (Answers.com, 2009; Huxley, 1932). Users seem to slip away into disassociation from
reality, a stimulating apathy for coping with lives that have been taken away from them, as by
the lack of freedom and existence of governmental structure reified by a societal caste system of
control.

Currently, Soma is a brand name for the muscle-relaxant drug carisoprodol.
The drug works “by blocking pain sensations between the nerves and the brain” (Drugs.com,
2009). Drugs.com reported carisoprodol is habit forming like many narcotics with similar
reactions of impairment, dizziness, and drowsiness (2009). There is even a church established in
Salem, Oregon that embraces the namesake of soma. The website for *Soma: A Church of Christ*
proselytizes “Soma is the Greek word for ‘body’ and for us it is a description of our desire to be
the physical expression of Jesus to our city and world, [and they] seek out the ‘missing’ among
our culture and help them discover a restored relationship with their Creator (Soma: A Church, n.d.). Soma, whether representative in drug or religious form, stands as a symbolic mechanism offering sanctuary for those disenfranchised by hardship.

The best example of soma as applicable to the aforementioned aesthetic function of comic book reading lies in a comparison to the narrative function of the term in Huxley’s *Brave New World (BNW)*. In *BNW*, the futuristic society maintains a peaceful co-existent state of delusional serendipity under the governmental institutionalization of the soma drug. This medicine fills the many voids in society [sex, war, leisure activity, etc.] while synthesizing a public consciousness of harmony, unaware of the dystopian values that invaded existence. Soma represents all that is important. Soma functions as an aesthetic, as medicine, and religion, and so on. I posit that the fragmentation of postmodern society invites similar medication through different respective aesthetics of commodity fetishism. Of the fragmented niches of Western cultural genres, comic culture cliques resonate with as fervent a dedication to its form as any. McCloud avowed to the artistic merits of comic book to reach and excite the five senses (McCloud, 1994). I argue that when readers engage in a maximum flow experience, comics not only reach the five senses but also prescribe a somatic resonance to a theoretical sixth sense in the consumer psyche. This somatic affect is not a guarantee but one of many potential outcomes when readers and consumers partake in a liminoid communitas with the form.

*Y* represents an excellent template for said somatic encounter. The need for this somatic sanctuary is at the crux of *Y*’s rhetoric. The polyvalence of Vaughan’s narrative creates an opportunity for readers to escape in the flow afforded by the mixture of fantasy narrative and subversive themes of disempowerment. I posit the flow of *Y* services readers as a kind of soma in an effort to cope with or escape the antithetical tensions of the post-9/11 public sphere in
America. Thus begs the question, “Why Y?” How can a 60-issue mature-label comic book series affect cultural footing and resonate rhetorical power, and why would this text appropriate more attention than a Superman or Spider-man or Batman book that continues in endless forms of monthly publication? What prompts Stephen King de-thrown his own successful graphic novel adaptations of his highly-acclaimed and award-winning *The Dark Tower* (2007) series, published by DC Comics’ lead competitor Marvel, hailing Y as “The best graphic novel I’ve ever read” (Vaughan, 2008).

I posit that King, the master of horror, through astute literary perception is able to recognize the horror of personal loss. The polyvalent affect of Y’s narrative castigates a neutering loss of self, both exciting King through its fantasy and comforting the horrors of the dystopic present. Specifically, the loss that resonates with King and many other readers attends to the perception of the decline of white male privilege in an increasingly multicultural and gender-neutral global world. Despite the diverse growth in comic book popularity, white males comprise a majority readership of graphic novels in America. In concordance with the white male communitas of comic shop culture and the perfect-pitch flow of Y’s narrative, the ritual of communitas and flow aide and abed escapism from the rise of feminist power, the expansion of multiculturalism, and the decline of white male privilege in the public sphere, resulting from the backlash typified by the Bush administration’s abuse of power. The kairotic significance of Y unfolds in the following section by way of unfurling critical terms and contextual components of the post-9/11 climate as critical components to the somatic flow of Vaughn’s narrative.
Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) employ the term polyvalent to describe the multiple values inherent in the bestselling political satire book *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*. The authors reported that reactions to the books took on multiple forms, especially considering the nature of the satiric humor and its interpretation (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). The rhetorical demand for analysis by the authors of their work is noteworthy for three reasons. First, the wildfire sales of *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* acknowledged national attention in the public sphere (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). Second, the book addressed a political topic timely to its release and the audience response (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). Third, the subject matter of the book is riddled with tensions and ambiguities (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). Rhetorically, the response to *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* and *Y: The Last Man* share each of these commonalities, which have been and will be discussed through analysis of the text/context.

The employment of the term polyvalent as opposed to polysemic, is critical. Polysemic texts allow “receivers to construct a wide variety of decoding,” preventing any one theme of evidence among audiences (Condit, 1999, p. 494). This interpretation is antithetical to the example of a graphic novel, which largely shares a universal recognition as to its function. However, the diverse values afforded from texts like *Bedtime Stories* or *Y* invites a connotative term in the form of polyvalence. Accentuating the usefulness of polyvalent observation Condit averred, “audience members share understandings of the denotations of a text but disagree about the valuation of those denotations to such a degree they produce notably different interpretations” (Condit, 1989, p. 106). This is not to say that the polysemic interpretations of *Y*
do not contribute to the success of the text, but rather there exists polyvalent themes resonating the interest of the text’s rhetorical values on the public sphere.

The public sphere is acknowledged by Habermas as a place where actions “are governed by consensus that emerges from the interpretive patterns of the lifeworld” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2002, p. 243). In the lifeworld or public sphere, audiences take information existing in the sphere already and employ that information in the process of interpreting new data or texts (Foss et al., 2002). Interpretations and word of mouth reactions are worked out in the public sphere, verifying its interpretive importance for rhetorical analysis of media. Techne, on the other hand, is a tool of rhetoric, which can be utilized by author or rhetor. Robert Johnson and Frances Ranney viewed techne as "an inventively systematic knowledge that [is] aimed toward previously thought-out, but not pre-determined, ends" (Hawk, 2004, p. 239). Comparably, the polyvalent nature of Y is parallel to this understanding of techne as a narrative tool for the author.

The Post-9/11 Climate as Warranting a Somatic Prescription

The post-9/11 political climate of the U.S. is closely linked or perhaps mirrored to the public sphere. This mirrored vision is reflected through the themes of academic scholarship and news stories rampant in the months and years surrounding September 11, 2001; with themes of feminist progression, multiculturalism, and the eventual decline of white male privilege at the forefront of the academic elite. The volume of feminist-apt issues that reverberated through the public sphere leading up to 9/11 is historically paramount. In addition to buzzing topics like abortion and sexual harassment resonating from the 90s, the elevation of female political encroachment tugged at the national consciousness. The political surge continued as New York Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton used her 9/11 leadership press coverage to begin a
subversively unannounced bid for the 2008 Presidency (Gilbert, 2001). Likewise, 2002 bore the Democratic shift in leadership when Nancy Pelosi became House Speaker (Getz et al., 2002). Academically, the feminist push revealed similar action. Editors chose to dedicate the entire winter 2002 issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* to rhetorical positioning in women’s studies. The arrival of spotlighted feminine power in America echoed throughout the national consciousness of the public sphere, no longer far-fetched or fleetingly hopeful, but present and secured.

The post-9/11 political climate witnessed the sharp uptake in multiculturalism nationally, and seeds of globalization abroad. The fallout from September 11, 2001 coincided with the usurping of the euro. By January of 2003, the dollar collapsed to a 3-year low against the euro, while the yen and other foreign currencies sought growth (Ryerson, 2003). Globally, nuclear tensions continued to elevate between North Korea, Iran, and to a certain extent Iraq, as vying for elite military global positioning served as a status ambition to several countries. The national landscape also erupted with concern over bioterrorism, witnessed by outbreaks of West Nile virus, listeria, and *E. coli* in 2002, while the continual threat of AIDS spread unrestrained in Africa (Getz et al., 2002). The public sphere in America shifted to one of distrust, unassuredness, and paranoia of the Other (Jackson, 1999).

Arguably, no group embraced the paranoia of distrust following 9/11 more than the privileged white male. The well-documented history of white privilege in America became shaken to its core. In addition to the rise of feminist rhetoric, women’s figurehead prominence, and the multicultural expansions domestically and abroad, the post-9/11 climate begat many sharp declines for privileged men in America. Newly acquainted millionaires lost fortunes as the dotcom bubble burst (Getz et al., 2002). Prominent CEOs joined a trend of economic figureheads
arrested for embezzlement and fraud (Getz et al., 2002). In a national sweep the Catholic Church, a pinnacle of white male power tradition in Western civilization, shook to its core with the mass confession of sexual corruption and infidelity to the public trust (Getz et al., 2002). However, the Bush administration stood as a theoretical “final straw” to the tipping point of white male privilege in America. Growing resentment oversees toward Bush’s leadership and warmongering flooded into public consciousness soon after the Iraq war prolonged past insinuated expectations. I argue these combined socio-economic and political weights forged a type of impotentization for the white privileged male, which for young males culminates in the coping mechanism inauspiciously titled new sexism (Benwell, 2007).

A Band-aid to Change: The Cathartic Flow of New Sexism

New Sexism

Benwell (2007) conducted a case study of males that were adept to reading men’s magazines known for gaudy and sexually translucent materials. The ethnographer discovered that a strong form of sexism still exists in males, under the guise of irony as a coping device for social progress (Benwell, 2007). The males’ use of irony facilitated sexist and/or homophobic views and legitimized “feminized” methods of consumption (Benwell, 2007, p. 540). The male subjects used humor as a masking agent for anti-masculine transactions while claiming not to be sexist (Benwell, 2007). Additionally, the subjects used sarcasm as defensive strategies of language (Benwell, 2007). While the author performed his case study over the reactions of 20-something males among group settings when presented with Men’s Lifestyle Magazines, this author ascertains that these reactions might be taken out of this specific context and applied to the white male readers of comic books [as a majority audience]. Further, I maintain the use of
humor, specifically sarcasm, works as a coping mechanism for males adjusting to new levels of
disempowerment, as exemplified by analogy through the privileged white male protagonist
Yorick in Y: The Last Man (Vaughan, 2008).

Theorizing the Communicative Utility of Y: The Last Man

The central characters of Y render Yorick’s services virtually useless. Her mother
blankets him as government, Agent 355 protects him as military, Dr. Mann advises him as
science, and the Amazons threaten his existence as enemy/other. With these historically
masculine roles fulfilled, Yorick often impotently resorts to sarcastic snarky retorts akin to
Benwell’s new sexism. In the opening pages of chapter 3, Yorick is on the Washington
Memorial lawn receiving a thorough beating at the hands of three dainty Amazon girls. His only
response is to retort, “You know, I’m seriously rethinking my no hitting women policy”
(Vaughan, 2008, p. 87-88). Of course, Yorick cannot muster the courage or strength to reply with
physical force and must be saved by Agent 355.

During the protagonists’ journey across the Midwest, Yorick questions Dr. Mann’s
inability to relieve him of sacred duty as last male on earth:

Yorick: I still don’t understand why you can’t just, you know, scrape a few cells from my
cheek and do your clone war experiments without me.

Dr. Mann: Yes, well, perhaps that’s why you didn’t receive the National Medal of
Science.

Yorick: Maybe not, but I almost qualified for the President’s Physical Fitness Award in
sixth grade…almost. (Vaughan, 2008, p. 138)

Yorick’s constant insubordination to female authority is subversive in his use of humor and
sarcasm as a method of social irony to coping with gender reversal (Benwell, 2007). Thus,
Yorick’s voice as written by Vaughan constitutes both the action of new sexism and a narrative
soma for Yorick the character, as well as readers coping with post-9/11 angst toward the social progress of feminism in raising awareness of patriarchal privilege.

Together, the narrative dialogue of Y and its use of new sexism comprised at the period in time where post-apocalyptic themes and social change weighed heavy on the public sphere. I hypothesize the subsequent underground-to-mainstream success of Y occurred during a “situationally contingent as well as strategically opportune and urgent” time (Morris & Sloop, 2006, p. 23). In other words, the positive success and reaction to Y: The Last Man was and is kairotically situated. Combining evidence of Vaughan’s narrative work with that of Benwell’s theoretical work, I posit a reframing of Benwell’s new sexism as a method of coping with post-9/11 socio-economic and political climate; specifically the rise of feminist power, the expansion of multiculturalism, and the perceived decline of white male privilege in the public sphere, resulting from the conservative backlash typified by the Bush administration’s abuse of power.

Framing the flow of Y: The Last Man as a kind of soma for readers conjectures a polyvalent coping mechanism for the decline of white male privilege in America while serving under the guise of fantasy narrative. However, the somatic flow of Y works in a positive way, treating readers to a dystopian world that tacitly reifies the worth of the Earth’s last white male. Vaughan’s vision initially casts the world as a chaotic ruination where representative women are unable to competently function and cope without men. The human race is dying out at the failed fingertips of females, and the resonating worth of Yorick, who then exists as the most precious commodity on earth, reifies the innate sense of worth for white male readers. An additional case could be made that these fantasy stories of apocalyptic disaster and coping with dramatic change eases the cultural psyche during periods of tumult. These medicinal benefits of Y perhaps explain
its resonance with readers, the word of mouth power of the books’ popularity and sales, and the kairos of Y’s publication.

The success of Y in its limited-series form renders both a success and curse. In addition to the posterity of aforementioned awards, the public accolades produce word-of-mouth, new readership, and mass popularity. However, vibrant attentiveness in the public sphere of popular culture inevitably suffers the post-creative fate of overexposure and/or commoditization. Burke might situate this crashing compromise to success as a form of occupational psychosis (Burke, 1984), where predictable patterns [of fan devotion and capital greed of the publisher] overlap to produce psychotic blends steeped in capitalism, individualism, and free-market excess where “the intensely competitive emphasis which has been gradually and imperceptibly disintegrating with the growth of corporations and monopolies” (Burke, 1984, p. 41). Thus, it remains to be seen if Y may lose its kairotic flair, or perhaps gain even stronger cultural footing at the hands of movie studios seeking to transform this genre-specific literature into a popcorn trilogy for aesthetic consumption and/or capital exploitation.

Capitalization situates as commonplace more so than societal spoiler. Modern soma can be purchased over-the-counter at any pharmacy, just as Brave New World might be purchased from any Barnes & Noble, just as Y: The Last Man may posit itself affront any comic shop display. In Brave New World Revisited (1958), Huxley averred to the societal issues of civil libertarians and technological advancements of capitalist intent:

Our contemporary Western society, in spite of its material, intellectual and political progress, is in-ceasingly less conducive to mental health, and tends to undermine the inner security, happiness, reason and the capacity for love in the individual; it tends to turn him into an automaton who pays for his human failure with increasing mental sickness, and with despair hidden under a frantic drive for work and so-called pleasure. (Huxley, 1958)
Huxley shared a healthy pessimism not unlike Burke, who warned of the entrapments of capitalism under the spirit of hierarchy and the rotten pursuit of perfection (Burke, 1997). Both authors displayed keenness in recognizing progress, but Huxley recognized a cultural progress that “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions” (Huxley, 1958). Thus, it is the choice consummation of goods and services [and comic books] as soma, as a means of constant distraction from progressivism and the death of the white man’s pre-apocalyptic chokehold, that constitutes rhetorical attention. The preceding cartography of *Y: The Last Man*, as a facilitator of reader flow, as a somatic Snuggie, kairotic to the post-9/11 climate and the decline of white male privilege, warrants rhetorical attention in extending the function of flow in popular culture, and serving as a rhetorical marker of why the last man was not seen standing on a hill waving his white flag, but instead hidden away in *The Android’s Dungeon*

Theoretical Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

As Burke purported the question, “why not extend such analysis of proverbs to encompass the whole field of literature?” (Burke, 1973, p. 296), I return to the theoretical extension I first posited, that graphic literature stands as an extendable and vital modern component to Burke’s quandary with the state of art under capitalism. Specifically, the text *Y: The Last Man* bridges an important case study into the somatic effects of flow on the liminoid audiences that partake in its supply and demand. As demonstrated, *Y* oscillates polyvalent themes of multiculturalism, the rise of the feminine voice, and other intertextual nuances of pop culture, and perhaps most importantly for primary readers/consumers, the perceptional decline of white
male privilege. The perception of white male privilege in decline is further queered by the simultaneous redeemification of the white male central protagonists’ worth.

According to Barthes and Levi-Strauss, myth offers imaginary solution to real social problems, inequity, and anxieties. Thus, these polyvalent narrative tools mediate the comic book consumer audience of social anxieties, the least of which could be argued a lagging occupational psychosis toward traditional serialized superhero comics.

While viewing comics as soma might prove problematic as per the demonstration of the polyvalence of Y, modern myths admittedly serve as fantasy solutions that make audiences feel better about real societal problems. Thus, what is Y doing here as a somatic function but giving audiences catharsis, so they might read the text and aver, ‘okay men are actually gone’. Somatic participation and aesthetic identification gets at asking, what is the potential of graphic literature? It could be potential at achieving polyvalent means, because it does different things for different people. Combing the lessons of chapters 3 and 4, these graphic literature texts create spaces for different engagements and dialogues. The next question might posit, “but are they doing enough (i.e., a male reader vs female reader reaction to Y: The Last Man might function entirely differently, and there are no guarantees that any positive reaction to the content might lead to actual change in action as a reaction to the polyvalent affect of a text.). Thus, what is the degree of impact? Is it a somatic effect, equipment for living, or nothing? These critical questions surface moving forward to chapter 5 and beyond the parameters of this project.

In short, somatic participation in aesthetic identifications would seem to invite equal opportunity for polyvalent readings that invite either status quo affirming catharsis or, instead, critically engaged reflection upon ideological complicity. That the Flow of graphic literature always already possesses these contrasting potentialities is, as both Burke and Turner might
agree, the very same possibility for exploiting or ignoring the paradoxes of commodity substance. Functioning as alternately escapist catharsis or therapeutic “equipment for living,” the somatic possibilities for aesthetic participation in flow can also be mitigated by the kairotic timeliness of narrated themes. Concordantly, I have theoretically linked the success of \( Y \) to the kairos with which its publication coincided, and thus only time will tell whether this short series is limited in medicinal fortitude or positioned as equipment that Burke would akin to the timelessness of Shakespeare. In chapter 5, I pull together these competing ideas, look toward an aesthetic identification, and review the terminology significant to the theoretical moves of this project, returning once again to my own art/capital quandary in the Marvel/Mouse House merger.
CHAPTER 5

“IN BRIGHTEST SALE, IN BLACKEST FRIDAY, NO COMMODITY SHALL ESCAPE MY SIGHT!”—CONCLUSIONS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FLOW AND AUDIENCE AGENCY IN COMIC BOOK CULTURE

Exploring Paradoxes of [Commodity] Substance for Comic [Book] Correctives

With Disney’s corporate acquisition of Marvel Comics, the explosion of fan anxiety over potential mass-marketed “Disneyfication” of beloved superheroes signals the recurrence of long-standing tensions between the conflicted status of comic books as both corporate properties and expressions of a literary art form. In chapter 1, I established this example of audience/consumer anxiety, as demonstrated online immediately following Mouse House announcement of Disney’s corporate acquisition of Marvel Comics. The voiced opinions of animosity demonstrated a correlation between the established norms of superheroes-as-commodities and the nostalgic power they command with their audiences as graphic literature. I posited this anxiety as competing between tensions of Disney’s fairy tale, perhaps feminized reputation in entertainment and Marvel’s masculine if not misogynistic historicity of narrative tropes. Fanboys in particular feared their beloved stable of violent/hyper-masculine heroes would succumb to the homogenizing market of capitalism; i.e., once-favored symbols of male power would be watered down to engage the largest possible audience [including females] in an effort to gain maximum capital returns from audiences in any variety of media outlets. The pressing rhetorical problem identified, therefore, concerns the largely unexplored interactive discourses within the comics community that navigate these tensions to meet the demands of corporate profit, the artistic explorations of creators, and the aesthetic demands of comics readerships both old and new. In this project, I proposed a joint exploration of Kenneth Burke and Victor Turner in order to
explore the participative identifications used to navigate the competing demands of comics as literary art and profit-driven commodity under Capitalism, both within and through these texts.

In chapter 2, I discussed the works of rhetorical theory/literary criticism scholar Kenneth Burke and anthropology/performance scholar Victor Turner as potentially enriching one another’s Marxist-influenced projects. Burke’s early works detailed his personal criticism of art under capitalism, as well as his passionate defense of literature as equipment for living. The interesting note of these two arguments can be found in the exception to the rule Burke allotted for literature even amidst the growth of mass-mediated late capitalism. In Burke’s exception, I pointed out the similarities that comics’ play in navigating the tight space between pure art and the motivations of capitalism. In Burke’s view, because art and literature under Capitalism exhibits a “paradox of substance” from these competing demands, strategies of “perspective by incongruity” can exploit contradictions to make participants conscious of opportunities for a therapeutic “comic corrective.” In Burke’s estimation, however, this task of carving out “equipment for living” within Capitalism using perspective by incongruity is a fully conscious task undertaken by wily authors and savvy critics, even though he acknowledges that the participatory identifications for audiences are often operating unconsciously.

In chapter 2, I continued by additionally exploring Turner’s anthropological tracings of cultural ritual, the liminoid, and flow as a theoretical aesthetic experience that illuminates Burke’s overlooked “aesthetic identifications” for participative audiences. Expounding the liminoid is pivotal to registering participation in ritual narrative flow, Turner’s notion of the liminoid acknowledges the enactment of choice. Choice is central term in capitalism, as it portends free markets and coyly drives the nature of voluntary consumerism that often swims within Burke’s “paradoxes of substance” for commodified art and literature. Consumers
prescribe agency through their commodity choices, simultaneously invoking a sense of consumer co-ownership that operates through aesthetic participation rather than critical consciousness. I argued no greater example exhibits consumer ownership in the capitalist liminoid than comic books and the nature of comic book culture. Comic scholars like McCloud (1994), Duncan and Smith (2009), and Wright (2003) averred to the historical cultural significance of the comic book medium as inviting active affective participation that is both aesthetic and psychological. Pustz (1999) even noted that the machinations of comics and comic culture are the ultimate example of negotiated relationships within the structures and strictures of commodity capitalism. The combined arguments of these authors and others suggests the aesthetic experience of comic book reading engages audiences with a participative ritual experience that Turner signified as flow. Thus, the flow-like aesthetic of comics is a critical component to understanding their power and influence for participative aesthetic identifications within capitalist culture. To explore how these participative aesthetic identifications might portend potentials for a liminoid “Comic Book Corrective” within commodified art and literature, I suggested examining samples of ongoing serial commodities and creator-owned limited series to contrast narrative Flow.

In chapter 3, I traced the roots of the superhero character Green Lantern in an effort to tease out the rhetorical power of serial superhero narratives in comic book history. I explored a case study of the mini-series *Green Lantern: Rebirth*, extract the theoretical implications that modern superhero storytelling exhibits. I demonstrated that *Rebirth* facilitates a polyvalent narrative, rich in symbolism, social commentary, and retroactive continuity. I argued the retroactive continuity employed by writer Geoff Johns in *Rebirth* is so densely packed, that only by theorizing a kind of rhetoric of retcon, termed *rhetcon*, can the polyvalent layers be unmasked. Whereas *retcon* denotes the creative production of a retroactive continuity that seeks
to selectively include past characters and events to streamline the brand commodity, rhtcon
connotes the critical reception [or rejection] of a rhtcon by polyvalent fandoms; while the former
attempts a polysemic commercial synthesis of a mythos, the latter expresses polyvalent critical
synergy of the rhtcon’s creative success or failure. That is, a creatively successful rhtcon is the
prerequisite for a commercially successful rhtcon of a series. Furthermore, I explored the
commodity nature of Green Lantern, revealing the reverse trend in which the lesser-known
superhero of Green Lantern Hal Jordan was successfully rhtcon-ed by the power of Rebirth’s
narrative and fan response, to become the next Iconic commodity for DC Comics. I concluded
that the rhetorical significance of tensions between artistic merits and capitalist demands by the
serial nature of comics like Green Lantern is then problematized by their circular need to extend
ad infinitum, causing an “occupational psychosis” for audiences that often resist the serial
demands that comics reboot themselves every few years to attract new audiences and refresh
continuity.

In chapter 4, I test the problem of rhtcon and occupational psychosis in comic books by
presenting the notion of stand-alone graphic novels or graphic literature as equipment for living.
This theoretical notion extends Burke’s argument of the power of literature, by viewing it
through the comic book medium and participative fandom, as providing opportunities to cope
with the alienating conditions of Capitalism. Additionally, this argument extends Burke’s work
by exploring the aesthetic experience of literature, the “aesthetic identifications” for audiences
that Burke never fully developed. I argued that Turner’s work with flow, on the other hand, fully
explores the nature of the aesthetic experience in terms of reader’s engaged ritual participation in
comic book narratives. I explored the flow aesthetic and graphic literature as equipment
argument using a second case study of Brian K. Vaughan’s limited-series Y: The Last Man. By
virtue of its nature as a limited series rather than ongoing serial, I theorized that Vaughan’s *Y* facilitates reader flow while avoiding the occupational psychosis of serial comics for readers. On the contrary, rather than having to navigate the serial narrative’s retcon demands and tensions, the accustomed occupational psychosis for readers/consumers is treated with a medicinal or “somatic experience” in *Y*.

This somatic flow operates through the polyvalent aesthetic qualities of graphic serial storytelling, while also addressing socially kairotic concerns of the primary reading audience as a niche audience rather than mass market. Via this somatic experience of unexpected innovative flow, audiences imbue an experiential circumstance that I posit as theoretically unique to graphic novel literature as fandom commodities and indicative of what Burke deemed a paradox of substance. That is, because commodity demands for commercially successful formula are always mitigated against the need for creative innovations that will expand audiences and profits, comics as commodity both requires and necessitates experimental texts like *Y: The Last Man* as comic book correctives to the occupational psychosis of formulaic Capitalism. The soma of such texts, however, is suspended between the polyvalent potentialities of escapist catharsis and therapeutic critique. Next, I review the larger theoretical scope with which I linked Burke and Turner, before returning to some final observations about the Mouse House Marvel merger and this study’s limitations and extensions.

**Reiterating the Flow of Equipment for Living**

Bridging the contributing works of Burke and Turner is at the theoretical crux of this project’s goal of extending several theoretical terms of analysis toward comics scholarship, critical cultural studies, and the broader implications toward the field of communication studies.
As stated, Burke’s quandary of pure art under capitalism maintains a modern strength in analyzing current modes of capitalism, while Turner’s performative interpreting of flow, as a ritual aesthetic, compliments an area where Burke stopped short of development. For this project, exploring the intersection of Burke and Turner occurs in the medium of capitalism surrounding comic book culture. Comic book culture is innately a genre created in and dependent upon the structures of capitalism, while the nature of the medium seeks to establish continued rites of passage through the creative expressions and values placed upon the sequential tapestries of art and literature. Comics culture requires consumer participation in order to function, and Turner accounts for this moment of participation with his discussion of ritual communitas and a flow experience.

However, Burke might have critiqued the serial nature of comic book superhero narratives creates an occupational psychosis for audiences whenever their trained incapacities for characters, stories, etc. are re-written over and retconned toward a capital gains endgame. Burke’s occupational psychosis problematic is the critical juncture at which I recommend extending the advent of a theory of rhetcon in order to identify the characteristics of successful retcon engagements that either allow for the satisfactory continuation of an aesthetic superhero flow engagement or benchmark the opportunity to enact critical engagement or disapproval, itself a form of comics communitas. Thus, through the merger of Burke and Turner we are able to trace the co-participative engagements and demands of producers, creators, and audiences in the narrative flow of an aesthetic identification.

Another avenue of comics literacy avoids the necessity of a rhetcon altogether, while satisfying the flow aesthetic for consumers. This cluster includes limited series or graphic novels that operate without the exhaustive constructs of seriality ad infinitum. In the case example of Y:
*The Last Man*, Turner’s flow again demonstrates an aesthetic identification for readers. Furthermore, I posit the polyvalent techne of *Y* functions as a kind of soma for its audience. This concept of soma is interesting in that it invites space to explore comics texts in several avenues, including Turner’s sense of participatory flow, wherein the polyvalent narrative can remedy audience anxieties as alternately escapist catharsis and critical therapeutic, thus returning to extend Burke’s theoretical potentiality for the creative innovations of graphic literature to offer a perspective by incongruity that functions as equipment for [commodified] living. This vast array of functioning possibilities from *Y*’s text is constituted what Burke deemed a paradox of substance within these comics commodities. The paradox of substance occurs in both case studies under different veils.

Examining Green Lantern and the serial nature of superhero commodities, the paradox pendulum swings between the values of superheroes as art versus commodity. For stand-alone series like *Y: The Last Man*, the paradox lies in the somatic interpretations that may evolve out of participatory readership. Are these texts just entertainment or are they equipment for living? The answer is polyvalent in that they perform different functions for different people. These artistic commodities create spaces for different engagements and dialogues to which the degree of impact can range from either a somatic effect, to equipment for living, to nothing. The importance lies in that texts like *Y* invite soma since it maximizes a paradox of substance, and we get to have a reflective moment, or *Green Lantern* affords an opportunity to critically engage in a participatory ritual of communitas and flow, embracing the artistic benefits of capitalism without compromising the purity of intentions. Bridging Burke and Turner with these many other included scholars and theories rewards and affords the communicative space to realize and theorize a extended interpretation of aesthetic identification, as witnessed in graphic literature.
Returning to Answer the Argument of the Marvel Mouse House Anxiety

Historically, since Marvel’s claim to fame in the early 60s, DC and Marvel have self-appointed themselves among the fan community as the long superpowers of influence, as the Big Two. This century, the Big Two have enacted a kind of Cold War-style race for market supremacy, but instead of a race to space, it’s a race for synergistic space in media, as both companies seek to establish webbed movie franchises that act as multi-media universes to each company’s comic properties. First Marvel risked everything to create their own in-house self-produced movies, branching the company Marvel Entertainment. The billion dollar gamble paid off when Marvel successfully translated one of their lesser-known commodities, Iron Man, into one of the most talked about films of 2008. Thus, in 2009 it made perfect [fiscal] sense that Disney scooped up Marvel Entertainment at the basement bottom price of $4 billion (Lang, 2010) to enhance their sagging media stables of marketable franchises. Following this announcement, DC Comics corporately became DC Entertainment, and shifted Diane Warner in a synergistic editorial role (Eller & Fritz, 2009). Thus, comic book franchises are the new black gold of Hollywood, and executives are continuing to feverishly mine the graphic literature for ideas, no matter the popularity. This move is interesting if not dangerous for comics fandom, for if too many books become more synonymous with film, they might lose their unique medicinal power to serve as equipment for living.

Thus, the anxiety-infused uproar at the announcement of Disney’s acquisition of Marvel Entertainment in the waning months of 2009 has been diagnosed under Burke’s prognosis of occupational psychosis. Fans have established norms of high expectations for their beloved comic book characters and commodities. Years of institutionalized tropes, childhood toys, nostalgic comics, lunch boxes, etc. have garnished consumers with a trained incapacity for
ownership and commodity fetishism. Thus, fan anxiety projects that favored superhero icons, that have fought for years to achieve legitimacy as art and literature, with unique merit will be reduced to Disneyfied commodities for bland exploitation as mass-marketed merchandizing machines for kiddie-entertainment and pseudo-literate masses. Concurrently, [post]modern audiences boldly assert their agency and co-ownership online, through the constant voicing of opinion to any and every comic book-related and/or other pop culture announcement or press release, via social networks or more simply, immediately following the announcements themselves, curtailed at the bottom of each webpage. The ownership is then locked into place, finalized and stored online for the world to see, when and at what time user VirginMobileSuckerPunch13 enacted his or her own sense of [un]noticed occupational agency. The continued cultural/mediated attention toward Comic-Con is proof that these multinational entertainment corporations take the early buzz of fandom very seriously in marketing their properties, as the distributors now request acceptance from the community before a product is released to the masses for consumption.

On the other hand, the visionary je ne sais quoi of Geoff Johns has not gone unnoticed. There is no coincidence that Johns’ popularity with readers and ability to register the iconic strengths of superheroes characters/commodities played a role in his stratospheric rise in corporate awareness. At the beginning of this project, Johns’ was still the master artisan at the wheel, churning out an unheard of average of five comic scripts per month4. However, during the inception of research and reevaluation into this project, Johns’ was handpicked by corporate parent Warner Bros. to serve in a unique consultant role on the transformation of DC’s characters into viable tentpole box office bait. Next Johns received higher than average [for comics creators] publicity during his Green Lantern brainchild culmination Blackest Night (2009-10).
*Blackest Night* operated as DC’s biggest move of their fiscal year, and ended up their most successful venture in more than five years. This comic book mini-series event caught attention from audiences outside of the comic book norm, including a Comic-Con segment with Johns and *GL* that was featured on *the Tonight Show*. Finally, in February 2010 DC Comics announced an editorial staff overhaul designed to coerce the synergistic demands that comic books/properties/companies are approaching in the twenty-first century. Once again, Johns was extended another high profile raise to the role of Chief Creative Officer of the newly re-named DC Entertainment (Lang, 2010).

Johns isn’t the only comic wunderkind to bear elevated status. *Y: The Last Man* scribe Brian K. Vaughan witnessed immediate success from his brainchild. *Y* gave Vaughan a three-year writing stint on TV’s most acclaimed fanshow *Lost*, writing some of the more notable episodes to date. In addition, Vaughan wrote more experimental works, like the graphic novel *Pride of Bagdad* (2006). *Pride*, dubbed an “adult” version of *The Lion King* for readers, is a re-imagining of the tragic instance during Gulf War I in which three lions escaped the city zoo amidst the bombing insurgency that occurred. As of late, Vaughan has worked hard translating his legacy work *Y* into an adapted screenplay. Whether or not the eventual film is a huge success is unnecessary to the strength of Vaughan’s literary work. In fact, if the film were unable to capture the magic of the book, it would only strengthen the validity of graphic literature as equipment for living. After all, if Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* can survive Baz Luhrman’s Leonardo DeCap[itate]rio Bohemian gun-toter, then the literary works of *Y* and *Green Lantern* can manage the media maelstrom.
Limitations of Analysis and Future Extensions of Research

There were several key limitations to the undertaking of this project. The initial scope of this project aimed to also research the micro- and macro-economic marketing moves of the Big Two (Marvel Comics and DC Comics) in conjunction with online feedback from consumers. While heavily tied to the cultural context of this study, larger synthesis of marketing techniques might warrant an entire project in and of itself. Time limitations in conjunction with research and production were simply not adequate to contribute a larger macro-economic perspective toward marketing analysis. Moving forward, it is critical to understand the theoretical terms developed in this project function to service future research of comic book literature and/or other areas of critical cultural/rhetorical studies.

In addition to time restraints, the theoretical legwork accomplished in this study invites future use and further theoretical expansions and clarifications. The methodological use and functional use of flow has been limited too often to media or performance studies. This study suggests expanding creative avenues of analysis demonstrating the dexterity of flow as a cultural and somatic aesthetic for negotiated consumption by active audiences and their ritual participations in forging media co-authorship (Real, 1990). As well, it would be fascinating to further examine the dynamics of consumer fetishism, as pertaining to occupational psychosis in comic book culture. Perhaps the Burkean extension of a comic [book] corrective to understand collectors and other offshoots of commodified comics fandom would abed this potential research.

Another possibility for inquiry would closely examine the co-constitutive dynamics between the fan community and the editors-in-chief of Marvel and DC beyond the creator fans who occupy liminoid middle management of comics properties. Creator-owned properties, as I
suggested in chapter 4, offer an interesting contrast for exploring the variational constraints of capitalism as they systematically impact creative or editorial content in the interests of mass-marketability. With the above example of distributor editors-in-chief, the use of Burke in this instance would again serve extremely helpful, as I posit from limited research that the fan community employs the scapegoating function of Burke’s hierarchy theory against editorial management whenever corporate decisions go against the grain of their trained incapacities for superhero commodities. The scapegoating function could assist the explanation of what occurs after readers/consumers experience the breakage of flow, creating discontent among the community with distributors and their staff. Further analysis of the distinct relationship between editors-in-chief and the public thus deserves future notice.

In sum, there stands a vast array of possibilities toward imposing and expanding rhetorical/performance theory into the invasive and borderline impeding advances of comic culture into the mainstream public sphere of popular culture. The shortage lies in the stark theoretical analysis questioning the cultural religiosity of fandom, and thus exhorts scholars to continue questioning the nature, motivations, and potential outcomes of audience pursuits of consumer commodities.
Chapter 1

1 I want to preface acknowledgment toward the indirect nature of news websites, specifically in the area of readers’ ability to prescribe instant feedback. In this instant, the voice of an audience comes to life, separate in ownership from writers, editors, and website staffers. Currently, the American Psychology Association dictates no proper citation in the form of immediate audience participation online. Thus, for the sake of simplicity I will attribute citations to the general website listing these user comments.

2 The term liminoid is surveyed in chapter 2, aligning within the context of Turner’s anthropological exploration of ritual communication and the placement of flow in the limens.

3 With regard to the works of Roger Caillois and Johan Huizinga on the nature of play, Schechner sees play as a “source of information about the environment and those who live in it,” and “a means for adults to keep or change their places in the hierarchy” (Schechner, 2006, p. 101). Caillois first averred to play as non-obligatory and thus free (Carlson, 2006). Second, play is also separate in space, time, and circumstances, “occurring in a ‘temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own’” (Carlson, 2004, p. 21). Third, Caillois averred play is uncertain as the course of action has yet to be determined, rendering outcomes uncertain (Caillois, 1961). Fourth, play is unproductive, creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor any new elements of any kind except for the exchange of property between players (Caillois, 1961). This failure to achieve full embodiment further alienates the unproductiveness of forums and transitions to Caillois’s fifth quality that states play is governed by rules. Thus, play is an important function to understanding the nature of flow. However, for this study the examination of flow more often lies closer to ritual than play, which is reflected throughout this analysis.
4 In *The Power of Comics: History, Form, & Culture* (2009), authors Duncan and Smith defined *fandom* as “the community of fans produced by organized activity” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 316).

5 *Polyvalent*, as pertaining to the opportunity for multiple values of interpretation, as the case is made for comic book texts in the case studies in chapters 3 and 4.

6 Schechner (2002) provided a definition of the performative-related liminoid as, “Victor Turner’s coinage to describe symbolic actions or leisure activities in modern or postmodern societies that serve a function similar to rituals in pre-modern or traditional societies. Generally speaking, liminoid activities are voluntary, while liminal activities are required. Recreational activities and the arts are liminoid” (p. 67)

7 Duncan and Smith (2009) described the term *graphic novel* as, “a label applied by creators and publishers to distinguish a comic book, which in practice is longer and perhaps self-contained, in contrast to most periodical comic books” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 317). This term will be explored in detail throughout subsequent chapters.

8 *Communitas* operates as a secondary term to Turner’s work with flow, which will be defined later in chapter 1 and contextualized with flow in chapter 4.

9 Keep in mind, this through line examination of Burke, Turner, and comic culture will be repeated in this order in greater theoretical detail throughout chapter 2. The point of rationale for a limited introduction in chapter 1 is to establish some key characteristics and terms that sustain the weight of this study and therefore require early attention.

Chapter 2
Commodity fetishism references exploited labor alienated from the conditions of consumption beyond use value, fetishized with a symbolic value as cultural capital. The difference is, this magical quality of commodities as status or some kind of cultural capital is the trick that Marxism sees in commodities, in that commodities do things to us, make us associate them with identity [like fanboys] and markers of taste [Coke vs. Pepsi] as cultural capital. This concept of commodity fetishism is a reoccurring theme in comics culture and thus important for the consideration of cultural significance toward comics properties and audiences throughout this project.

Note that the majority of extrapolation of Burkean critique will come from The Philosophy of Literary Form (1973), as this work presents the strongest linear thought progression of Burke’s art/capital arguments.

The pollution-purification-redemption theory grows out of Burke’s rationale for the negative and other forms/consequences of hierarchy (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2002). Discussion and explanation of the pollution-purification-redemption will occur later in chapter 3, as it is an argument that is situated closely to the specific case study of serial superhero comics featuring Green Lantern.

Burke (1968) described form as “the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (p. 31).

Collected in Counter-Statement (1968).

In Counter-Statement, Burke (1968) averred, “One might apply the parallel interpretation to the modern delight in happy endings, and say that we turn to art to indulge our humanitarianism in a well-wishing which we do not permit ourselves towards our actual neighbors” (p. 41). While Burke exudes a kind of cynical take on the motive of positive forms,
this introduction to the notion of audience choice and fantasy entertainments welcomes the
conversation of narrative style and flow, to be discussed and theorized in chapters 3 and 4.

7 Now, it might be important to recognize a limited scope in the defining and analyzing of
Burke’s body of work. Certainly, I cannot ascertain a be-all interpretation of Burke’s motive and
method throughout his career. Burke is recognized as a pillar figure in several disciplinary
studies, entire groups are organized around explicating the theoretical utilities of Burke, and his
applicable fertility will continue to be used in any number of future studies. Rather then
attempting to identify, critique, or analyze any portion(s) of Burkean Theory, my goal is to
identify key areas of application to my study, and perhaps acknowledge where Burke’s lack of
attention toward ritual aesthetics can be connected to Turner’s positing of a cultural-bent
liminoid flow aesthetic.

8 Burke’s form of literary criticism and particular [life-long] interest in Shakespeare are
noteworthy assessments that shall be addressed in the conclusion of the chapter, but first,
assessment of Burke’s interests and anxieties need further demonstration.

9 A summary of Permanence might posit that collectively the book concentrates toward
Burke forming ideological criticism for himself. Burke’s literary style often functions as a
processing ground through which the literary critic cum theorist cum rhetorician works through
problems of the literary, theoretical, and rhetorical. The difficulty then extends to the ability of
the academic censor to select where and when to edit the brunt of Burke’s critiques, simplifying
his arguments in a way that stays true to the function of his larger work while highlighting
Burke’s individual lamentations sentence-by-sentence or paragraph-by-paragraph. Thus, this
author opted to centralize three early works, instead of the career pantheon of criticism Burke
constituted toward art and capital. The choice of early Burke criticism also affords the
opportunity to look at unique questions in time that might only be answered by the passage of time and the advancements of not only leisure capitalist tendencies, but also the advancement of anthropological studies on aesthetics. Thus, this study is poised to position Burke-as-skeptic-inquisitor, with which answers of the more recent theoretical and capital might best lend itself. Burke is both accessible and accessed, in terms of his theoretical viability to the communication field. Instead of presupposing this author could in some way ultimately answer Burke’s critique(s), the goal is more cohesive in that the aim is to extend Burke’s quandaries and potentially link them to other theorists, Turner specifically, in a new-fashioned way, via comic book culture.

10 In Permanence, Burke (1984) averred that occupational psychosis “corresponds to the Marxian doctrine that a society’s environment in the historical sense is synonymous with the society’s methods of production” (Burke, 1984, p. 38). This concept of societal environments directly affecting the output of societal productivity can be demonstrated in the sense of farming, corporatizing, public discourse, or this project’s emphasis, on genre narratives reflecting societal anxieties. Occupational psychosis thus operates as a central motif toward establishing the functionality of kairos, which will be further explicated in chapter 4.

11 Burke (1984) discussed the orientation of trained incapacity and defined it as “that state of affairs whereby one’s very abilities can function as blindnesses” (p. 7). Foss, Foss, and Trapp (2002) noted of trained incapacity that “as individuals adopt measures in keeping with their past training, the very soundness of that training may lead them to misjudge situations an to adopt the wrong measures for the achievement of their goals—making their training an incapacity” (p. 208). This conversation of comic culture’s trained incapacity with form will be extended in later chapters.
Burke’s *Art under Capitalism* (i.e., art/capital) argument is highlighted in the previous chapter of this project and explicated periodically throughout subsequent chapters. For this reason, the depth of this specific essay is abridged in chapter 2, in an effort to review without digressing too far from the central themes of the project.

Turner defined *symbology* as “the study or interpretation of symbols” and/or “representation or expression by means of symbols” (Turner, 1982, p. 20).

Turner (1982) situated *semiotics* as “a general theory of signs and symbols, especially the analysis of the nature and relationship of signs in language, usually including three branches: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics” (p. 20-21).

In explicating the ritual symbol, Turner (1982) found *symbols* “are crucially involved in situations of societal change—the symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends and means, aspirations and ideals, individual and collective, whether these are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observed behavior” (p. 22).

Of Gennep’s three phases, *transition* is the only note of interest to this study. Turner emphasized *transition* as the intermediary phases of passage, the “’margin’ or ‘limen’…[whereby] the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few…of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states” (p. 24). The transition phase is highlighted, only due to its establishing of the limen threshold, which will be divided between the liminal and liminoid in the following section.

Turner further situated the historical cyclic nature of the work/play or work/leisure cycle, coinciding further back in time with good/bad weather, crop seasons, the calendar
evolution around festivals, etc. (Turner, 1982). Put into Turner’s perspective, “one works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid” (Turner, 1982, p. 55).

17 Turner’s division of communitas includes spontaneous communitas, ideological communitas, and normative communitas (Turner, 1982, 1988). These forms of communitas, as they collectively relate to flow, will be explored in context with and in chapter 4.

18 This use of the term “adoption” denotes Turner’s communicative application of the term from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi is considered a foremost authority on flow, and built a large portion of his career identifying, theorizing, and publishing on the ideas of flow and flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 1991, 1975). However, coming from the discipline of psychology, Csikszentmihalyi’s work on flow does not constitute the immediate communicative functions that Turner’s ritual performance-rooted placement of the term conditions. Csikszentmihalyi’s origins of flow will be explored more in chapter 4. However, Turner will be acknowledged with the in-canon treatment of flow, as he positioned it in the strongest context toward the theoretical goals of this project.

19 Sonya Foss, Karen Foss, and Robert Trapp (2002) summarized Burke’s viewpoint of trained incapacity as, “the condition in which ‘one’s very abilities can function as blindnesses.’ As individuals adopt measures in keeping with their past training, the very soundness of that training may lead them to misjudge situations and to adopt the wrong measures for the achievement of their goals—making their training an incapacity” (p. 208). Thus, consumers are trained toward certain expectations regarding the exchange of currency for goods and services that are expected to present an agreed-upon outcome. Over time, there becomes an unconscious or incapacitated understanding that reifies expectations based upon prior experiences. For example, modern movie audiences are trained over time to expect groundbreaking special effects
in sci-fi cinema. If new audiences were shown a flick with the low-tech nuances of say, the 1970s, then the audience might exhibit a trained incapacity to repel that movie going experience, as it does not line up to their existing beliefs/expectations.

20 McCloud (1994) also recognized the significance of our “increasingly symbol-oriented culture,” and noted, “as the twenty-first century approaches, visual iconography may finally help us realize a form of universal communication” (p. 58). McCloud’s assertion proved accurate, if not only for the sense of continued globalization of Western commodity iconography such as superhero chevrons, etc.

21 McCloud further asserted “throughout its history, comics have harnessed the power of cartoons to command viewer involvement and identification” (McCloud, p. 204).

22 In Philosophy, Burke entitled his argument for the power of literature “Literature as Equipment for Living,” examining an array of proverbs and other quotables that perform a communicative power toward the cultures that embrace the written word (Burke, 1973).

23 In chapter 4, I explore the historical usage of the term soma, before relying closest toward author Aldus Huxley’s use of soma in his dystopian sci-fi novel Brave New World (Huxley, 1932).

24 Endorsing the claim of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) that all determination is negation, Burke concludes that the concept of substance is endowed with an un-resolvable ambiguity. As he reflects, “Men are not only in nature.” The cultural accretions made possibly by language become a “second nature” with them. Here again we confront the ambiguities of substance, since symbolic communication is not merely an external instrument, but also intrinsic to men as agents. Its motivational properties characterized both “the human situation” and what men are “in themselves.” Whereas there is an implicit irony in other notions of substance, with dialectic
substance the irony is explicit. For it derives its character from the systematic contemplation of the antinomies attendant upon the fact that we necessarily define a thing in terms of something else. (1945, p. 33) For Burke, this is “an inevitable paradox of definition: To define, or determine a thing is to mark its boundaries, hence to use terms that possess, implicitly at least, contextual reference” (p. 24). Substance, Burke notes, is etymologically a scenic word. “Literally, a person's or thing's sub-stance would be something that stands beneath or supports the person or thing” (p. 22). The point is not to banish substance terms but to be aware of their equivocal nature. Banishing the term substance, he maintains, does not banish its functions; it merely conceals them. Moreover, the irresolvable ambiguity built into the very concept of substance is precisely what facilitates linguistic transformations and makes dialectic possible.

...Because of the antinomies of definition and the paradox of substance, one must invoke difference to constitute a meaning. In the Burkean system, as in the Derridean, meaning is disseminated.

25 As explored in this project, these aesthetics might include but are not limited to narrative and visual tones of comics, characters and scenes of iconography, affective judgments or sociological critiques both conscious and unconscious of the part of creators and readers, etc.

Chapter 3

1 Bill Finger biography is a mysterious conspiracy and creative tragedy. Many in the comics industry credit Finger with handling the bulk of Batman’s creative conception, including an array of his most popular rogues (Porter, 2008) Unfortunately, Finger worked as a for-hire artist, and many of the writers/creators in early comic history were never given actual credit toward their creations. While Bob Kane eventually took sole credit for the creation of Batman
and died a millionaire, Finger struggled financially his entire life, before meeting a medically challenged early death (Porter, 2008).

During the early years of comic book distribution, many writers and artists worked on a for-hire basis. At the time, comic book companies were not yet acquainted with the practice of printing the names of writers and artists in their books. Subsequently, a large number of books and re-printings do not afford proper authorial citation, and thus cannot be attributed beyond their title (Wright, 2003). As Wright performed much of the historical heavy lifting for Golden Age Green Lantern stories, his name shall remain associated to their citation unless otherwise documented.

In establishing a through line that will be explored in detail toward the end of this chapter, Burke’s pollution-purification-redemption cycle facilitates out of the notion of hierarchy. Foss, Foss, and Trapp (2002) averred, “The negative and its related terms of hierarchy, perfection, and mystery are the foundation for the rhetoric of rebirth” (p. 209). Here in GL canon, Jordan’s historicity is founded upon a system of hierarchy, from which he must adhere to authority and beware the consequences of his GL Code; i.e., the “moralistic thou-shalt-not’s” or “don’ts” that lie in the negative (Burke, 1997, p. 13) of GL membership.

According to Green Lantern mythos, the Guardians of the Universe long ago divided the universe into “3600 territorial units” with each sector “shaped like a triangular wedge” pointing to the center of the universe. Subsequently, the segment including Earth that exists under Jordan’s authorial care is designated Sector 2814.

A more modern narrative trope distinguishes that each story arc comprises approximately six issues of regularly monthly comic book title. Editorially mapping out story arcs are significant for the eventual collecting and distributing of the story arcs as graphic novels.
For example, issues #1-6 of *Green Lantern: Rebirth* were distributed in monthly serial form until the completion of the mini-series. Several months after the story completed distribution, DC collected the entire story into one graphic novel, which has seen multiple reprints in recent years.

6 In *Green Lantern: Secret Files and Origins*, Johns and Gates (2008) imparted that a Green Lantern’s Power Ring is the “standard weapon…controlled by the user’s willpower. It taps into willpower created by sentient beings throughout the universe and collected on Oa in the Guardians’ Central Power Battery” (Johns & Gates, 2008, p. 7).

7 According to *Green Lantern: Secret Files and Origins*, the Guardians of the Universe preside from their base of operations on the planet Oa, which happens to exist in Space Sector 0, aka the center of the universe (Johns & Gates, 2009). The Guardians represent a mysterious group of sentient beings with knowledge and power beyond omniscience. Their mysterious origin also solicits the Burkean role of mystery in hierarchy and pollution-purification-redemption. Foss, Foss, and Trapp (2002) clarified, “mystery performs two functions in a hierarchical system. One is that it encourages the maintenance and preservation of the hierarchy because it encourages obedience…[and second] it enables the members of the hierarchy to identify and to communicate with one another” (p. 208-209). Thus, the Guardians establish a hierarchic order that further coincides with *Rebirth’s* pollution-purification-redemption metaphor(s).

8 In the nature of Marvel and DC Comics reputation as the Big Two competing for supremacy, some critics and fans argue the Marvel mini-series *Secret Wars* (Shooter, 1984) begat the event-driven age of comics. Regardless of who or which company started what, a new narrative function was unleashed to audiences, and consumers have been buying event-driven storylines more than any other superhero narrative form since.
DC Comics’ three most prolific and iconic characters have historically been Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. These three comprise DC’s Trinity or Big Three, as they were the only DC superhero comics to stay in publication since their inceptions from 1938-1941 (Wright, 2003). Subsequently, Wonder Woman had already gone through a death/rebirth-like transformation in the late 1980s; otherwise, her narrative adventures might have mirrored the hero-breaking gimmicks of the 1990s.

There goes Jordan breaking the Guardians hierarchical rules aka Burke’s thall shalt not’s, ergo polluting his soul with sinful burdens, of which the method of purification must be appropriated in order to rectify the situation (Burke, 1997).

Purification, according to Burke (1997).

The Spectre is the incarnation of God’s Spirit of Vengeance. “The Spectre is among the most powerful beings in the universe[,] limited only by its need to bond with another host” (Dougall, 2004). In an editorial note, the Spectre’s first appearance for DC came in More Fun Comics #52, circa 1940. Furthermore, the initial version of Jimmy Corrigan-as-the Spectre went on to team up with the Justice Society of America and none other than the original Golden Age Lantern, Allan Scott (Dougall, 2004).

Geoff Johns’ is literally a comic book renaissance man, by way of his narrative style, explored in the latter half of the chapter.

Notable character deaths/resurrections prior to Rebirth included but will never be limited to: Jean Grey/Dark Phoenix of X-Men, Superman, Supergirl, Spiderman’s former love interest Gwen Stacey, Wonder Woman, and Hal Jordan’s long-time friend, fellow hero, and Rebirth co-star Green Arrow. Notable death resurrections to take place after Rebirth include but are not limited to: Captain America, Captain America’s sidekick Bucky, Batman, Batman’s
sidekick Robin [Jason Todd], Thor, and Green Arrow’s young protégé, Red Arrow. Characters to
be killed and resurrected by John’s himself include but are not limited to: Superboy, Barry Allen:
The Silver Age Flash [to be resurrected by Johns’ in 2009], a plethora of supporting characters,
and none of these count the army of undead superhero/supervillain zombies, er, Black Lanterns
resurrected for Johns’ Green Lantern/DC Universe 2009-2010 magnum opus, Blackest Night.15

Duncan and Smith (2009) defined continuity as “the relatedness among characters and
events said to happen in the same fictional universe…[which] can pose a problem for creators
trying to deal with decades of backstory” (p. 233). The definition provided by these authors aver
to the dissonance dividing personal creativity and corporate commodity, nostalgia and audience
identification, new ideas and established histories, myth and fantasy.16

16 The Green Lantern Corps is an intergalactic police force under the controlling guise of
the mysterious and ominous Guardians of the Universe. Most of the Guardians and Corps were
destroyed or disbanded after their battle with Parallax (Marz, 1996).

17 In Rebirth, Jordan is metaphysically undergoing a constant psychic shift or cycle of
pollution, purification, and redemption. Johns successfully recons Jordan into three individuals
merged as one; Parallax-as-pollution or polluting of the soul, Jordan-as-purification or sacrificed
for the greater good, and the Spectre-as-redemption or a paranormal entity that carries out justice
in the form of redemptive violence. The narrative device resonates because it shows the classic
struggle of the hero overcoming great odds, while it services a personalized metaphor for the
larger themes of character rebirth in the story and the nature of retroactive continuity as an
everlasting superhero narrative trope.
The Silver Age chant of the Green Lantern, whence he holds his ring and lantern together to recharge: “In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight! Let those who worship evil’s might, beware my power, Green Lantern’s light!” (Johns, 2005b).

Duncan and Smith (2009) reiterated Marie-Laure Ryan’s definition of braided narrativity (Duncan & Smith, 2009). Ryan (1992) noted, “This type of narrative follows the intertwined destinies of a large cast of characters. The text presents no global plot, but a number of parallel and successive subplots developing along the destiny line of characters...Since this mode of narrativity presents no macro structure, it does not end in an event motivated by the demands of narrative closure, but may be continued ad infinitum by stringing new episodes along destiny lines” (Ryan, 1992, p. 374). This concept of braided continuity is applicable to Johns’ style as well as the established modern form of event storytelling as broken into manageable story arcs. In effect, story arcs can satisfy limited kinds of immediate endings while supplying unending opportunities for future stories to be told.

The success of *Rebirth* has led to a narrative resurgence in the avocation of Silver Age characters with updated characterizations, including 2009’s top selling *Flash: Rebirth*.

Another example of narrative weaving at play here, as Johns’ researched where Jordan’s actual ring was last seen and in *Rebirth* clarifies that in fact Jordan’s close friend, Green Arrow has possession of the ring in his basement.

TV Tropes.org appropriates a McGuffin as “a term for a motivating element in a story that is used to drive the plot. Unlike Chekhov’s Gun, it actually serves no further purpose — it won’t pop up again later, it won't explain the ending, it won't actually do anything except possibly distract you while you try to figure out its significance. In some cases, it won't even be
revealed. It is usually a mysterious package/artifact/superweapon that everyone in the story is chasing” (TV Tropes.org, 2010).

23 Theoretically, Burke might treat comic fandom as having an occupational psychosis [as defined in chapter 2] with the comic form, as the form must always maintain a cyclic function, while creative decisions are often wrought with corporate influences more interested in commodity exploitation that meeting the individual desires of each and every fan voice. Suffice to say, when writers like Geoff Johns or Grant Morrison proclaim to write with a fan-like excitement for their favorite characters, the medium experiences a synthesis of a kind of corporate-fandom, where polysemic goals are sought to appease both parties.

24 Coogan, Reynolds, and Jewett and Lawrence all prescribed to the philosophy that the superhero cannot kill. Thus, any exception to this mythic trope would sever the ideological nature of the character (Coogan, 2006, Reynolds, 1994, & Lawrence & Jewett, 2002).

25 Chapter 1 established the contextual description of the Gimmick Age, in addition the aforementioned usage in chapter 3.

26 Johns’ limited and/or mini-series works include: Infinite Crisis, 52, Final Crisis: Rogue’s Revenge, Final Crisis: Legion of 3 Worlds, Flash: Rebirth, Superman: Secret Origin, Adventure Comics, Blackest Night, etc. (DC Universe, 2010).

27 Barry Brummett (2008) asserted, “Style orders people in social organization through aesthetics” (p. 45). Thus, comic books serve as the ultimate aesthetic style in that fans perform agency in the consumption, collection, and organization of comics and comics continuity.

28 See Johns’ Rebirth follow-up Sinestro Corps War, in which the Green Lanterns are permitted to inflict lethal force on their enemies (Johns, 2008).
Turner viewed the liminoid as different from the betwixt and between of the liminal in that there must exist the selection of choice involvement; i.e., liminoid is about choice (Turner, 1988).

Furthermore, the term retcon becomes an active part of industry and fan jargon, as the both noun and verb components are regularly called into action for popular and lesser-known characters and storylines alike.

Wright (2003) noted how publishers used to print a bevy of fan letters in the back pages of comics for decades, whether the comments were of a positive or negative reaction (Wright, 2003). In 1986, DC Comics allowed fans to dial a 1-900 number in order to vote on whether or not the latest version of Batman’s sidekick Robin would die at the hands of the Joker or not…[incidentally, they voted to kill him] (O’Neil, 2008).

From August 2009 to December 2009, Green Lantern-centered books took the top sales spot each month (Comic Chronicles (a), n.d.). In September, Green Lantern and books associated with the Green Lantern event storyline Blackest Night landed consistently in the top 10 comics by units sold. In October, the GL books astonishingly held the Top 6 spots (Mayo, 2009), November had the top 2 spots (George, 2009), and December held 6 of the Top 10 (Comic Chronicles (b), n.d.).

As discussed in greater detail in chapters 1, 2, and 4.

Foss, Foss, and Trapp (2001) accredited Burke’s retirement process as a philosophical self-sequestering amid an electricity-less farm in upstate New York (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2001).

Of course, Burke (1997) auspiciously regarded that, “There is a kind of aesthetic negativity whereby any moralistic thou-shalt-not provides material for our entertainment, as we pay to follow imaginary accounts of ‘deviants’ who, in all sorts of ingenious ways, are
represented as violating these very Don’ts” (Burke, 1997, p. 13). This concept of predatorial consumerism for commodities, as culturally medicinal aesthetics, centralizes the rhetoric analytic focus of the comic book medium in chapter 4.

36 Foss, Foss, and Trapp (2002) best summarized Burke’s ramifications of hierarchical order in the guilt-purification-redemption cycle: “The rhetoric of rebirth involves movement through three steps—pollution, purification, and redemption. Pollution is the initial state of guilt, an unclean condition of sins and burdens; purification is the step of cleansing or catharsis, where the guilt is sloughed off; and redemption is the stage of cleanliness in which a new state—whether physical, spiritual, or psychological—is achieved” (p. 209). I have already explored how the narrative metaphor in *Rebirth* explores the cyclic nature of pollution-purification-redemption according to Burke. However, in the larger scope of comic book properties, the corporatized narrative of pollution, purification, and redemption occurs as fan-favorite writers leave top-selling series or are replaced by lesser-coveted writers/artists [i.e., pollution], the series subsequently become stagnant in the fans’ eyes, and the sales of books go down, subsequently killing the momentum of the book [i.e., purification], only to be retconned or revitalized down the line [i.e., redemption], repeating the cyclic or serial trend of the superhero medium over and over. Thus, only when the graphic literary form can be broken of this cycle, can pure art perhaps demonstrate an observable bridge between capitalism and art, which begets the focus of the fourth chapter to come.

Chapter 4

1 The rise of Image Comics is the critical corporate emergence of creator-rights in comics, as detailed in chapter 1.
The term graphic novel is relatively new to the medium. The successful tandem of Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* in 1986 created a distribution evolution in what comics historian Peter Sanderson called “The year that changed comics” (Carey, 2007). These two mini-series were the most successful collected editions to be distributed, remaining in publication to this day. The distribution market took notice, and has shown consistent growth ever since. Duncan and Smith (2009) avowed the term describes, “the more ambitious works in the art form” (p. 4) creating a literary pedestal distinguishing a difference from more common comics. “For creators, labeling their work a graphic novel allows them to distance themselves from the commercial and periodical connotations associated with comic books. For publishers, graphic novel is a term that helps elevate the status of their product and has allowed them entrée into bookstores, libraries, and the academy” (p. 4). Thus, a certain context is deduced among the reading community.

As noted in chapter 2, much of the theoretical contributions toward flow and flow theory stem from the career works of Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi’s list of works preoccupies interest in flow from a psychology standpoint, with specific interests toward media texts. Subsequently, the brunt of all flow research remains interested from the perspective of media functions. Weber, Tamborini, Westcott-Baker, and Kantor (2009) employed Csikszentmihalyi’s theoretical flow base to examine cognitive synchronization of attentional and reward networks, while Bowman (2008) sought to reconstitute the perspective of media flow theory (Weber, Tamborini, Westcott-Baker, & Kantor, 2009, & Bowman, 2008). Additionally, Drengner, Gaus, and Jahn (2008) analyzed the influence flow plays in event marketing, while Romanowski and Vander Heide (2007) utilized the theological “reversing the hermeneutical flow” method for film dialogue analysis (Drenger, Gaus, & Jahn, 2008, & Romanowski &
Vander Heide, 2007, p. 40). Each of these scholars worked toward expansion of the theoretical concept of flow, but the majority of works seem preoccupied in with film, media, and/or theological studies. On the other hand, Turner’s employment of flow, as a ritual and performative aesthetic, situates the concept within the communication discipline. Thus, Turner’s take represents the cleanest application and definition of flow and its use in the study.

4 Richard Schechner (2002) concluded that play both functions “as” performance and “is” performance, with a communicative relationship akin to ritual and theatre (p. 121).

5 Chapter 2 discussed the implications of the liminoid, in terms of consumer buying power, as a product of post-Industrial leisure capitalism. Hence, consumers make a distinct choice to buy books, hoping that their purchase is rectified with achievement of a reader-flow aesthetic payoff. Sullivan (1995) noted, “comics are so object-based, in fact, that the most vital way of interacting with them is to engage their function as objects, rather than narrative vehicles” (Sullivan, 1995, p. 4). This outdated position contended to the then-current speculator’s market of the early 1990s. I posit the aesthetic chase is the current state of the medium, and any belief that comics are purchased, as part of the defunct speculator’s market, stand falsified or worse, delusional. Comic consumption is a commodity fetish appeasement of the highest regularity. Perhaps it would be pertinent to interject Brummett’s assertion that “commodities are sold to us on the basis of an induced, or artificial, desire” (Brummett, 2008, p. 64). Artificial or not, flow is an aesthetic that aligns well within capital laws of commodity consumerism. In line with Brummett’s thoughts, Pustz (1999) proclaimed, “They are the perfect consumer products” (p. 19).

6 See Homer’s *The Odyssey* for the origin of the hero quest trope, as depicted in literary mythology.
Duncan & Smith (2009) reported that, “intertextual images remind the reader of something he or she has encountered in other media (movies, books, paintings, TV shows, etc.)” (p. 161).

The phrase “Pwnd!” has become synonymous with online forum lingo. Pwnd is derivative of the word owned, as implying ownership. When a person deploys a cynical jab at another person online, the victory line of evidence communicated is owned, meaning to own a person, or get them, or call them out on a mistake. Incidentally, the O letter on the standard keypad is conspicuously close to the P, opening the door for the casual typist to inadvertently type P instead of O. Thus, owned becomes pwned or Pwn’d, disrupting the laws of literacy but enacting a unique term to cyber and fan culture that continues to grow in infamy. Thus, if the reader understood pwned without any need of further explanation, I thus achieved an intertextual communication with that particular reader, as Vaughan uncannily did with Y’s audience base.

Both Vaughan and Guerra are credited with co-creation of Y: The Last Man. However, it is Vaughan’s scripts that drive the narrative features of notice in this analysis. If the project were to include the visual rhetoric of Y: The Last Man, no doubt Guerra would receive the full brunt of attention. However, Vaughan’s notoriety as a scribe puts his work in the focal point of analysis concerning the use of Y as a text. Thus, Vaughan’s contributions receive the most concentration in chapter 4.

Vedic is an Indian religion centuries old, and derivative of more modern Indian religious texts, composed in the Vedas (Vedic Religion, 2009). In ancient rituals, “Vedic religious practices involved ceremonies that centered on ritual sacrifice of animals and on the use of soma [plants] to achieve trancelike states” (Vedic Religion, 2009).

The blanket with sleeves, “As seen on TV” (Snuggie, n.d.).
12 The Android’s Dungeon is Springfield’s comic book store featured on TV’s longest runniest primetime sitcom, *The Simpsons*. Incidentally, the proprietor of The Android’s Dungeon is an intertextual aficionado and cynic, the aptly named Comic Book Guy (Comic Book Guy, n.d.).

Chapter 5

1 It is significant that Marvel’s first venture toward in-house films re-launched the legitimacy and prowess of Robert Downey Junior, elevated the directorial status of John Favreau, sparked the corporate reworking of DC Comics, and infamously alerted Disney of the potential to capitalize on commodity properties, leading to Disney’s buyout of Marvel in 2009.

2 Cents?

3 Diane Warner is the Hollywood executive for Warner Bros. responsible for the transformation of the Harry Potter series of books into the globally successful series of movies.

4 The average writer tends to balance about two writing duties per month, while the *It* creators/writers often juggle three or four a month, when busiest.
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