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# “Superman’s Editor Mortimer Weisinger”: the Success and Extension of the Superman Brand in the Silver Age of Comics

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“SUPERMAN’S EDITOR MORTIMER WEISINGER”:  
THE SUCCESS AND EXTENSION OF THE SUPERMAN BRAND IN THE SILVER AGE

OF COMICS

by

Justin Engelbart

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

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at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

August 2017

## ABSTRACT

### “SUPERMAN’S EDITOR MORTIMER WEISINGER”: THE SUCCESS AND EXTENSION OF THE SUPERMAN BRAND IN THE SILVER AGE OF COMICS

by

Justin Engelbart

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017  
Under the Supervision of Richard Popp

My thesis examines the career of Detective Comics’ editor Mortimer Weisinger from 1957-1970, during which time Superman transitioned from a simple character to a complex brand. It details the creation of the character and subsequent growth into multiple mediums. Weisinger’s greatest contribution to the hero was an extended mythology and spin-off comic series. I analyze these series, as well as his other editorial tendencies, to understand the business strategies and management of the Superman brand. Another interest in this thesis is comic book fandom, as feedback from fans allowed National’s management to identify trends. Weisinger’s involvement with early science fiction fan communities preceded his career as an editor, putting him in a unique position as a fan that turned their passion into a career. His management of the Superman line of comics informed the treatment of superhero brands today.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

This is a thesis on the development of Superman at National Comics. It discusses the comics industry between 1940 and 1970 with a focus on National Periodical Publications (later renamed Detective Comics). My study focuses specifically on Mortimer Weisinger, an editor who was in charge of the Superman line of comics from 1946-1970. By studying him in particular, the paper aims to analyze the industrialization of cultural production. Superman is discussed beginning with its creation and continuing as it was molded into the highly marketable character we know today.

Most comics Weisinger edited were part of an era referred to as The Silver Age (1956-1970).<sup>1</sup> During this time, comics grew into an industry at the expense of artistic expression and individual credit for artists and writers. Cultural production in this time became an industrial process. As the sales of characters such as Superman surged, it became a valuable property. This is a trend that is fully realized in the contemporary conglomerate era, as superhero stories continue to dominate entertainment industries and become even more popular and profitable. While the market for intellectual property continuously grows, Superman continues to gain value.

I look at the development of franchising and branding as the mediums of television, radio, film, and others continued to develop during this time period. The editors, writers, and publishers in charge of Superman identified the huge demand and worked to solidify the character's place across all available media. Another aim is to historicize the development of licensing during the formative years of the comic book industry. This study will provide a context for the way that the character and franchise are used in our current time.

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<sup>1</sup> Schumer, Arlen. *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art* (Portland: Collectors Press, 2003).

This thesis relies on the concept of transmedia (TM), a term originated by Henry Jenkins. It refers to stories involving the same character across various media. The concept of transmedia has become influential in media studies, because there are so many media industry productions that revolve around franchises. Jenkins defined the term in relation to our current age of media convergence, which he finds “places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of worldmaking.”<sup>2</sup> However, a historical precedent for transmedia exists in the comic book business of the 1940s-1960s. National Comics, under editor Mortimer Weisinger, developed a business model that depended on Superman stories in multiple mediums to promote and sell the character. Weisinger extended the Superman mythology by introducing new characters and settings, and creating spin-off comics featuring his most popular characters. He organized these new additions by creating an extended universe, a model that anticipated the treatment of modern media franchises like the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the DC Multiverse, and the Star Wars Extended Universe.

This thesis is the most in-depth study of Weisinger to date. There is surprisingly little scholarship on the infamous editor, despite the fact that he was the most influential editor at the largest comic book publisher in the industry for nearly three decades. This oversight could be the result of a general resentment from comic book fandom. He was often characterized by his employees as a tyrant and described as a source of constant torment and ridicule. An artist who worked for Weisinger, Wayne Boring, offered this summary of his experience: “I was afraid I’d go to hell and he’d be in charge!”<sup>3</sup> Weisinger’s heavy-handed nature as an editor provides us a window into what it was like to work in the comics industry at the time. Weisinger established a

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<sup>2</sup>Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006): 20.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Boring, “Quote of the Day: Wayne Boring on Mort Weisinger,” *Comics.gearlive.com*, accessed June 12, <http://comics.gearlive.com/comix411/article/q308-quote-of-the-day-wayne-boring-on-mort-weisinger>



work culture at National/DC that could be seen as a microcosm of the industry. In the early days, the comic book business consisted of small teams of artists and writers working on creative products. By the time Weisinger was in charge, the industry had and had transformed in the process. Comic book productions required much larger teams, a nearly constant production schedule, and editors to ensure quality standards and deadlines were met. This gave it a much more industrialized quality that was not as friendly towards artists and writers.

### **Areas of Interest**

There are four main areas of scholarship for comic book studies. There is mythological scholarship, which is done by scholars who study the forms of mythology and narrative and apply them to comics. Another form of scholarship, cultural studies, approaches comic books from a variety of different disciplines. This includes scholars focused on feminist studies, race, and fandom. A third body of research approaches comics from an industry perspective. This includes all business related aspects of the industry. Finally, there are those who approach comics from a branding and franchising perspective, which combines industry and cultural studies approaches. Studies of this nature offer insight into the cultural thought and historical forces that influence the industry.

### **Mythology**

Superman is one of the most studied characters in popular fiction. From a mythological perspective, the character has been studied as an analogy for American imperialism and colonialism, as a representation of the American dream, and more. The character is also studied for its philosophical dimensions, as the most familiar version of the hero relies on a strict moral code and works to uphold the status quo.

Superheroes are seen by some as a modern version of mythology, and thus are often studied from a mythological perspective. A discussion of the studies about the mythological nature of heroes begins the pioneers of the field. Joseph Campbell's famous study of the monomyth argues that stories involving heroes are comprised of the same fundamental elements, regardless of time periods, culture, or language.<sup>4</sup> Carl Jung's concept of archetypes refers to twelve characters that recur in all stories, and proves useful as a term in most mythological studies.<sup>5</sup> Umberto Eco applied semiotics to Superman, identifying the problematic nature of the fixity of the Superman formula.<sup>6</sup> Works by these authors predated cultural studies as an academic field and have influenced and provided a basis for all future research.

Jennifer Canzoneri, for example, studies superheroes from a psychological perspective. A collection of essays she edited discusses, amongst other things, the psychology behind why superhero comics resonated particularly with a Depression era audience, and again with an audience beginning in the early 2000s.<sup>7</sup> Her work, as well as the work of many others in this field, relies heavily on Carl Jung's work. JC Chambliss studies comics by analyzing their artwork, arguing that they turn individual characters into representations of cultural ideas.<sup>8</sup> Samuel Winch looks at the media itself as perpetuating ideas of good and evil.<sup>9</sup>

Some authors also approach the cultural productions of Superman from a postmodern perspective. Postmodern authors are interested in the mythological and psychological elements of the character. While the character resonated phenomenally with a Depression-era audience,

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).

<sup>5</sup> Carl Golden, "The Twelve Common Archetypes," Soulcraft.co, accessed August 22, 2016, [http://www.soulcraft.co/essays/the\\_12\\_common\\_archetypes.html](http://www.soulcraft.co/essays/the_12_common_archetypes.html)

<sup>6</sup> Umberto Eco and Natalie Chilton, "The Myth of Superman," *Diacritics* 2 no. 1 (1972): 14-22.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Canzoneri, *The Psychology of Superheroes: an Unauthorized Exploration* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2008), 75.

<sup>8</sup> J. C. Chambliss, "Superhero Comics: Artifacts of the US Experience," *Juanita Voices*, no. 12, (May 2012): 149. 2012

<sup>9</sup> Samuel P. Winch, "Constructing an 'Evil Genius': New Uses of Mythic Archetypes to Make Sense of bin Laden," *Journalism Studies* 6, no. 3 (2005): 285-99.

the modern version of the character finds itself in the throes of an existential crisis. Michael Kobre grapples with what the depictions of death in comic books actually mean, concluding that the sorrow and nostalgia associated with Superman's death in a 1961 issue is very real in spite of its designation as an imaginary story.<sup>10</sup> An essay by Martyn Pedler discusses how the recent abundance and availability of comics now has retroactively altered fan memories.<sup>11</sup>

## Cultural Studies

A cultural studies perspective on comic books has seen an increase in scholarship in the last few decades. Stuart Hall and other scholars at The Birmingham School in England pioneered this approach in the early 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Many scholars, including Shymon Baumann, are interested in the legitimation of comic books as an artform. He discusses comics as a low-status artform, finding the fact that comics themselves were cheap, disposable, and targeted a young demographic partially responsible.<sup>13</sup> Thierry Groensteen finds that a lack of critical, archival and academic attention has resulted in comic books perpetually being considered low status.<sup>14</sup> Rachel Williams champions comics as a powerful and underutilized tool in classrooms.<sup>15</sup>

A large number of academics approach comics with an eye toward how it relates to other mediums. An interdisciplinary approach to comic books attempts to place it in relation to film, television, and radio. Henry Jenkins offers explanations for the way different mediums depicting

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Kobre, "Whatever Happened to The Man of Tomorrow?," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 53 (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Martyn Pedler, "Suffering and Seriality: Memory, Continuity and Trauma in Monthly Superhero Adventures," in *Creativity, Ownership and Collaboration in the Digital Age Conference*, Cambridge. 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Webster, Frank (2004). "Cultural Studies and Sociology at, and After, the Closure of the Birmingham School". *Cultural Studies*. **18** (6): 848

<sup>13</sup> Shyon Baumann, "Intellectualization and Art World Development: Film in the United States," *American Sociological Review* 66 (August 2001): 406.

<sup>14</sup> Thierry Groensteen, "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization" in *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, eds. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, "Image, Text, and Story: Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom," *Art Education* 61, no. 6 (2008): 13-19.

stories featuring the same characters function as one large text.<sup>16</sup> Matthew Freeman argues that, while it has become more popular in the later part of our decade, transmedia storytelling has existed in various forms since the early 1940s.<sup>17</sup>

As the industry grew, new markets were identified. Comics, which were initially aimed at a male audience, began being produced for a female audience. Gender scholarship approaches comics from this perspective, analyzing the depiction of women in texts in relation to the time period and cultural climate they were produced in. Of course, feminism can also be used to analyze all comics irrespective of their targeted audience. Feminist studies are interested, more broadly, on how women engage with comics.

The interest of my study is comics created under the editorship of Mort Weisinger. In this period at National/DC Comics, men were entirely responsible for comic production. Since some of the texts they produced were aimed specifically at young women, it became a topic of interest for feminist scholars. Surprisingly, many feminist scholars find that female characters in Superman comics could be seen as positive representations of women. Joshua Roeder argues that Lois Lane comics actually promoted the second wave of feminism.<sup>18</sup> Nadine Farghaly observes that the writers behind Lois Lane did not always take stances on important issues, although when they did they were able to align the titular character with the roles women were assigned with in society.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Alex Link observed that Supergirl invited readers to be inspired by her

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<sup>16</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006),

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Freeman, "Up, Up and Across: Superman, the Second World War and the Historical Development of Transmedia Storytelling," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 35, no. 2, (2015): 228.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Roeder, "Lois Lane: In Step with Second-wave Feminism," *Fairmount Folio: Journal of History* 16 (2016), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Nadine Farghaly, *Examining Lois Lane: The Scoop on Superman's Sweetheart* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013), viii.

efforts while remaining aware of a male-dominated society.<sup>20</sup> Lillian Robinson contends that all female superheroes are sexualized, but Supergirl may be less so because of her age.<sup>21</sup>

Ethnicity, like feminism, is a lens that can be used to view and critique comics. The large numbers of Jewish writers and editors in the early comic book field is a topic that has recently received a lot of attention from scholars. Arie Kaplan draws connections between people of Jewish descent and the comic book industry, comparing the industry to the predominantly Jewish industries of film and radio.<sup>22</sup> Simcha Weinstein observes that comic book heroes have been shaped by the Jewish heritage and beliefs of many of their writers.<sup>23</sup> Derek Parker Royal observes that an increase in focus on the role of Jews in the comic industry is simply the result of an increase in general scholarship about popular media.<sup>24</sup>

## Fan Communities

Comic book fandom has become a topic of interest to some scholars. Letters sections in comics provided an indirect way for fans to communicate with other fans and each other, and provide a way to study early fan interactions. Paul Lopes finds that the rapid increase in comic book culture has happened in spite of the reduced popularity of comics themselves.<sup>25</sup> Ian Gordon looks at these fan sections, concluding that many letter writers would later find jobs in the comic

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<sup>20</sup> Alex Link, "The Secret of Supergirl's Success," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 6, (December 2013): 1177-1198.

<sup>21</sup> Link, "The Secret of Supergirl's Success," 1185.

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, Arie. *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (Baltimore: Leviathan Press, 2006)

<sup>24</sup> Derek Parker Royal, "Jewish Comics; Or, Visualizing Current Jewish Narrative," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 29.2 (2011): 1-12.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), 11.

book field.<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Brown looks at comic book fandom as a community with its own values and social hierarchy.<sup>27</sup>

Some scholars study how fandom can have a value far beyond simply leisure and enjoyment. Bradford Wright's work details the transformative effects of comic books on American youth culture.<sup>28</sup> Gerard Jones details how visionaries from the early science fiction community would later shape the comics industry.<sup>29</sup> John Cheng and Michael Ashley provide similar studies of early science fiction communities, where many amateur enthusiasts like Weisinger turned their passions into careers.<sup>30</sup>

Another type of fandom research deals with the interaction between fans and the creators of cultural products. Timothy Pevey, for example, examines how excessive branding and overexposure of the Superman character has caused it to grow stale and forced its creators to use constant gimmicks to maintain audience interest.<sup>31</sup> A collection of essays edited by Joseph Darowski emphasizes how Superman has changed in its seven decades of existence in reaction to the perception of its audience.<sup>32</sup>

## Industry Perspective

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<sup>26</sup> Ian Gordon, "Writing to Superman: Towards an Understanding of the Social Networks of Comic-Book Fans," *Participations* 9 (November 2012): 120-132.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey A. Brown, "Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital," *Journal of Popular Culture*, (Spring 1997), 23.

<sup>28</sup> Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 223.

<sup>30</sup> John Cheng, *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 53.

Michael Ashley, *The Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines From the Beginning to 1950*, Vol. 1 (London: Liverpool University Press 2000), 79-80.

<sup>31</sup> Timothy A. Pevey, "From Superman to Superbland: The Man of Steel's Popular Decline Among Postmodern Youth" (Masters of Arts Thesis, Georgia State University, 2007), 20.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph J. Darowski, "Preface" in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 2.

One large body of comic book scholarship revolves around the industry. This kind of scholarship explains how the industry functioned and offers sales data and insight on marketing trends with research drawn from quarterly business reports and industry magazines. Firsthand accounts from industry professionals and experts are often included in this type of scholarship.

Much industry scholarship focuses on the collectible nature of comics. Mike Benton's study details the development of industry trends and details the transformation of comic books into collector's items.<sup>33</sup> Ian Gordon studied the way marketing thought developed into seeing comics as commodities.<sup>34</sup> Goran Bolin's book attempts to discover whether there is an implicit value to cultural products.<sup>35</sup> Bart Beatty finds comic book sales are not always reliant on the success of the American economy.<sup>36</sup> Some scholars are interested in the role copyrights and trademarks have in modern business. Joe Sergi has studied comic books characters specifically from the perspective of copyright lawsuits.<sup>37</sup> Jane Gaines ties Superman's fortunes directly to DC's successful defense of its trademark.<sup>38</sup>

## Branding and Franchising

Scholars who study branding and franchising combine the approaches of industry research and cultural studies. While industry research operates on a wider scale, research about branding and franchising focuses on specific aspects of the industry. Industries related to brands are diverse and can include films, original scores and other music, sheet music, novelizations,

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<sup>33</sup> Mike Benton, *The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History* (Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing, 1989).

<sup>34</sup> Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 134.

<sup>35</sup> Göran Bolin, *Value and the Media: Cultural Production and Consumption in Digital Markets* (UK, Farham: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2011)

<sup>36</sup> Bart Beatty, "The Recession and the American Comic Book Industry: From Inelastic Cultural Good to Economic Integration," *Popular Communication* 8, no. 3 (2010): 203-207.

<sup>37</sup> Joe Sergi, *The Law For Comic Book Creators* (NC: McFarland and Company, 2015), 40-41.

<sup>38</sup> Jane Gaines, "Superman and the Protective Strength of the Trademark," in *The Logics of Television*, Patricia Mellencamp ed, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 175

fast-food and department store tie-ins, and of course comic. For example, one study may focus on the publishing house that produces comics, while another may center on a film studio that makes movies featuring the same character.

As a character such as Superman is adapted into new media, it becomes a brand. The owner of the brand is responsible for licensing their product to third parties, but also oversees productions in industries that are part of the larger corporation. The process comic characters go through as they are adapted into new media is of interest to some scholars. Benjamin Smith's study presents three different approaches for "adaptation theory" of comics to film.<sup>39</sup> He identifies fidelity as the key ingredient in a successful adaptation. Avi Santos compares the success of merchandising Batman with the less successful merchandising of The Green Hornet.<sup>40</sup> Merchandising itself can be seen as a form of adaptation, as it represents the reimagining of a character. Another of Santos' articles discusses how intellectual property laws were enforced in the 1930s.<sup>41</sup> Derek Johnson studies the networked production relations of franchising both structurally and subjectively.<sup>42</sup> He concludes that media franchising is both economically significant and culturally meaningful. A second study by Johnson looks at the expansion and rebranding of Marvel's X-Men in the 1980s, attributing their success to an increase in specialty retailers.<sup>43</sup>

## Superman Studies

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<sup>39</sup> Benjamin Smith, "Spandex Cinema: Three Approaches to Comic Book Film Adaptation" (Master's of Arts Thesis, University of Central Oklahoma, 2009), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Avi Santo, "Batman Versus The Green Hornet: The Merchandisable TV Text and the Paradox of Licensing in the Classical Network Era" *Cinema Journal* 49, No. 2 (Winter 2010): 63-85

<sup>41</sup> Avi Santo, "The Long Ranger and the Law: Legal Battles over Corporate Authorship and Intellectual Property Management, 1939-1942," *Critical Studies in Media Communication Vol. 29*, (August 2012) 185-201.

<sup>42</sup> Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising* (NY: New York University Press, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Derek Johnson, "Franchise Histories: Marvel, X-Men, and the Negotiated Process of Expansion," in *Convergence Media History*, Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake eds., (New York: Routledge, 2009), 14-24.



Superman's first appearance in *Action Comics #1* in 1938 set a precedent for both comics and brands.<sup>44</sup> The character was the first iconic superhero at a time when a growth in technology provided new mediums for the brand to expand into. The first print run of 200,000 copies sold out almost immediately. However, at the time it was impossible to tell whether comics were simply a fad.

Even if the initial success of comics was unsustainable, they remained profitable and an important part of American culture. The initial success of comics led directly into The Golden Age of comics, an era lasting from the late 1930s until the early 1950s. During this time, comics developed as an industry and the amount of publications featuring superhero characters greatly increased.

A number of scholars focus on The Golden Age, as comics during time held great cultural significance both for their popularity and the way they resonated with the general public. Many studies of this nature seem to be motivated by nostalgia. Larry Tye's book *Superman: The High-flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*, published in 2012, discusses what went on behind-the-scenes in the offices of National Periodicals Publications (later DC Comics).<sup>45</sup> He offers a look at the industry behind Superman with a biographical research of some of its most powerful figures. Brad Ricca and Les Daniels offer similar historical accounts. Ricca's focuses on Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, and through them struggles writers and artists faced in the early comic book industry.<sup>46</sup> Les Daniel's work is a literal encyclopedia of everything related to Superman.<sup>47</sup> William Schoell's book focuses on The Silver Age of Comics,

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<sup>44</sup> Jerry Siegel, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed," *Action Comics #1*, June 1938.

<sup>45</sup> Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House LLC, 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Brad Ricca, *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster – The Creators of Superman* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 41.

offering textual analysis of comics to gain specific knowledge of particular characters.<sup>48</sup> Mark Waid focuses specifically on Superman in the 1960s.<sup>49</sup> Gary Westfahl discusses the scientific innovations introduced in Superman comics from the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>50</sup>

Within historical scholarship, Weisinger receives some attention. Various books and dissertations about Superman mention Weisinger only in passing as one of many industry professionals behind the character. Some works, such as Javier Regalado's dissertation "Bending Steel with Bare Hands: Modernity and The American Superhero in the Twentieth Century" fail to even mention the editor.<sup>51</sup> Ian Gordon's work on science fiction fandom and superheroes is ancillary to this project and has proved to be an indispensable resource.<sup>52</sup> Still, Gordon has yet to study Weisinger specifically, as his work has a broader historical focus. This thesis is the first substantial work focusing specifically on the editor.

Mort Weisinger was a contentious, but nevertheless powerful and influential figure in the comic book industry. He was one of most dominant but least creative figures in comics as the art form struggled for legitimacy. His output was prolific, as he oversaw nearly 1,500 issues of America's most famous media franchise. He was an infamously difficult boss to work for and anecdotal stories from those who worked for him demonstrate why. Still, many of the artists and writers who worked for him would eventually find great success and earn respect in the field. Some of the professionals who began in the industry under Weisinger's tutelage include Neal Adams, Bill Finger, Bob Kane, Curt Swan, and Jim Shooter; names that would be instantly recognizable to fans of the field. Even after Marvel's resurgence in the early 1960s, National still

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<sup>48</sup> William Schoell, *The Silver Age of Comics* (Duncan, OK: BearManor Media, 2010), 17.

<sup>49</sup> Mark Waid, *Superman in the Sixties* (New York: DC Comics, 1999), 6-9.

<sup>50</sup> Gary Westfahl, "Computer Science on the Planet Krypton," in *Science Fiction and Computing: Essays on Interlinked Domains*, ed. David Ferro and Eric G. Swedin (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2011): 83-94.

<sup>51</sup> Aldo Javier Regalado, "Bending Steel with Bare Hands: Modernity and The American Superhero in the Twentieth Century" (PhD., diss., University of Miami, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 51.

provided steady work for professionals attempting to make a living in the field. The imprint Weisinger left on the comic book industry is what draws my attention to him as a subject deserving more attention.

The Silver Age of Comics (1955-1970) warrants a closer look because it was a formative time for the emerging comic book industry. Revisiting this era provides insight into how comic franchises and properties would eventually become institutions in a broader entertainment industry. Analysis of National's business strategy from the time explains how Superman fits into our current media landscape as a property of Time Warner. The use of spin-offs and the growth of the character into additional mediums in the 1950s inform the way franchises are treated today. We can see how Superman developed as an intellectual property and the effects spin-offs and an extended mythology had on the brand.

This study tells us a lot about National, Superman, and Weisinger. At the same time, it also illuminates the way certain types of media industries work. Specifically, it provides an explanation for how cultural production is done in an industry that lacks cultural cache. Comics were a low status medium, and many writers and artists considered it a stepping-stone to more lucrative and artistically rewarding work.

## **Methods**

This is a work of historical analysis. It relies on a variety of primary sources, including contemporary articles from magazines and newspapers, industry texts, personal accounts, and memoirs. I also analyzed comics, television shows, films, cartoons, and licensed products. I also used secondary sources about the history of the development of the industry.

Personal accounts offer the firsthand experience of those who worked in the industry.

Interviews with professionals give us an idea of what it was actually like to work in the

National/DC offices and how their working conditions affected cultural production. Collections by publishers TwoMorrows and DC provided reprints of trade press articles that may not have been accessible otherwise.

As part of my research, I consulted The Mort Weisinger Papers at the Comic Book Industry Collections at the University of Wyoming. I hired a researcher in Wyoming to scan through the collection, and she provided me with a list of articles, interviews, and other documents that were included. I was then able to track down articles from the collection using UW-Milwaukee's interlibrary loan.

Another collection, the Mort Weisinger Papers at the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University, provided additional materials. This collection is a home to articles Weisinger authored for various magazines, his correspondences, and a short story. The entirety of this collection is available digitally.

This paper also features analysis of primary sources, namely comic books from the era. My analysis of Weisinger's tenure as editor focuses on his tendency to extend Superman's mythology. I also analyze the content of these stories to identify Weisinger's implementation of consistent rules that helped create and organize a consistently growing comic universe. Finally, I describe Weisinger's inclusion, and deliberate exclusion, of predominant themes of the era, which help place Weisinger's comics in the broader social landscape of the 1960s and 1970s.

I approach these sources from a branding and franchising perspective. Through analysis of Superman products in multiple mediums, I aim to trace the development of the franchise. I looked at every source with a focus on how they contributed to the development of the Superman brand. While the cultural context, nature of production, and content of the products I analyzed is

interesting; the products themselves contribute to a larger text. Each product serves the purpose of not only promoting comic books, but also selling the character in other incarnations.

### **Chapter Descriptions**

This chapter serves as an introduction to my study, providing historical context and summarizing previous research. It also explains my methodological approach and situates my research in the context of comic book scholarship. Another intention of this section is to posit the broader ramifications of the project.

Chapter Two details the history of National Publications with a specific focus on Weisinger and the Silver Age. It recounts the beginning of Weisinger's career in the science fiction fandom community. His background uniquely prepared him for his role at National Publications, where his policies influenced decades of comic books. The chapter provides an analysis of the pervasive themes of these comics, such as suburbanization, new technologies, and the Cold War, which connected them to a larger cultural context.

Chapter Three identifies Superman's adaptation into new mediums. As the media landscape continued to develop, Superman was featured in a radio show, series of Technicolor cartoons, films, TV shows and more. Weisinger kept a finger on the pulse of the fandom, often offering spin-off comic books such as *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* and *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* to capitalize on new markets. Fundamental to this chapter is the theory that the adaptation of a brand to multiple mediums could be seen as a contributing to one large text. Each incarnation, then, has the ability to enhance the others.

This chapter also explores how branding, copyright, and franchising worked in this era. In addition, I analyze how Superman's image was used in advertising, licensing, and public

service campaigns. National's success protecting their trademark helped define the way trademarks and copyrights would be treated in the entertainment industry.

The conclusion assesses the long-term impact Weisinger and National/DC have had on the American entertainment industry. It describes the way modern business sees intellectual properties and synergizes them into multiple industries. Finally, it discusses how Weisinger created an extended universe for Superman to organize the character's mythology. The universe Weisinger created anticipated how Disney's Marvel Universe and Time Warner's new DC Multiverse are used today.

## Chapter 2: The Comic Book Industry 1934-1970

Newspaper comics achieved popularity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1880s and 1890s, mass newspapers provided inexpensive, accessible entertainment for the masses.<sup>1</sup> However, by the late 1930s, comic-book publishers were exhausting the backlog of daily and Sunday strips available for reprint and were paying huge royalties for the material. As once-loved pulp magazines steadily decreased in popularity after World War II, comic books had an opportunity to attract baby boomers and older consumers who would enjoy novel, exciting stories.

This chapter will recount the history of National Publications/DC from its beginnings to their eventual sale to Kinney Services. Changes enacted by an editor named Mortimer Weisinger, who received complete control of the Superman line beginning in 1941, provide a historical precedent for transmedia franchises and brand extension.<sup>2</sup> Next, an explanation of Weisinger's involvement in the early science fiction fandom community serves as an example of how passionate fans could turn their hobby into a fulltime job. The final section of this chapter details a shift in the industry from the passion of an individual artist's vision to an assembly line model of cultural production.

In spite of his success, Weisinger was an unhappy, troubled individual. Neal Adams, a respected comic book artist who briefly worked for Weisinger, offers this impression: "For an actual human being to meet him for the first time, I think he just wanted to crush them."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elsa Ann Nystrom, "A Rejection of Order: The Development of the Newspaper Comic Strip in America, 1830-1920," Master's of Arts Thesis (Chicago: Loyola University of Chicago, 1989), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House LLC, 2012), 161. Weisinger was an editor for *Superman* since 1941, but received complete authority over all of DC's comics in 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Eury, *The Krypton Companion*, 99.

Weisinger's inclinations to "crush" new employees provide an example of what made him notoriously difficult to work for.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Birth of the Comic Book Industry**

The comic book industry began in 1934 when Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson founded National Publications. A former U.S. Army Major and pulp magazine writer, he assembled the first American comic books featuring original material from freelance cartoonists.<sup>5</sup> Lacking the capital to purchase the rights to reprint more established properties, he was left with little choice but to commission original material.<sup>6</sup>

Wheeler-Nicholson published three titles from 1934-1938. The first was *New Fun: The Big Comic Magazine* (February 1935), followed by *New Comics* (December 1935), and finally *Detective Comics* (March 1937).<sup>7</sup> In 1934, financial difficulties led him to Harry Donenfeld's office at Independent News's publishing and distribution division for help. Donenfeld agreed to publish Wheeler-Nicholson's comics on the condition he was made a partner. The collaboration ensured his third title, *Detective Comics*, would remain solvent.<sup>8</sup> In 1937, Wheeler-Nicholson founded DC, Inc with Donenfeld's business advisor Jack Liebowitz.<sup>9</sup> Lack of initial success forced Wheeler-Nicholson to sell all three of his properties, *More Fun Comics*, *Adventure Comics*, and *Detective Comics* to Donenfeld months later.

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<sup>4</sup> Arlen Schumer, *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art* (Portland: Collectors Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Les Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 132.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, "New Fun: The Big Comic Magazine," *New Fun #1*, February 1935. *New Comics #1*, December 1935.

*Detective Comics #1*, March 1937.

<sup>8</sup> "1930s" in *DC Comics Year By Year A Visual Chronicle*, eds. Daniel Wallace et al. (London, United Kingdom: Dorling Kindersley, 2010): 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



*Action Comics #1* (June 1938), was the first comic that featured Superman published by National Periodicals. The first issue was a staggering success, and Donenfeld ordered a newsstand survey to determine what readers were so excited about. The results proved without a doubt that it was Superman. Adding to his good fortune, later that year DC Editor Vin Sullivan enlisted Bill Finger and Bob Kane to create a similar character for their DC Comics line, and the two soon unveiled Batman to the world.<sup>10</sup> The success of *Action Comics* allowed Donenfeld to cease production of his pulp comics permanently. Inspired by the success of *Action Comics*, Liebowitz then partnered with publisher M.C. Gaines to launch a second company, *All American Comics*. An opportunistic businessman with a background in law, Liebowitz was quick to identify and capitalize on new markets.

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the original creators of Superman, were taken by surprise at the sudden success of their character. Siegel explains, “I just wrote stories that I enjoyed, and I was hopeful that if I enjoyed it then other people would. I have a great healthy respect for the fans. This was a super character, and I wanted to do right not only by the character but also by the reader.”<sup>11</sup> Wheeler-Nicholson took a risk on the strip in 1938, after six years of rejection letters from nearly every newspaper syndicate in the country. Even Wheeler-Nicholson had rejected the strip before eventually purchasing it. However, sudden success gave the co-creators a streak of naivety. Only months after finally selling the first Superman strip, Jack Liebowitz tricked the two into selling their rights to the character. A copy of the misleading letter he sent to Siegel and Shuster still exists, part of which reads: “It is customary for all our contributors to release all rights to us. This is the businesslike way of doing things.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>11</sup> Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 41.

<sup>12</sup> Kobler, “Up, Up and Away!,” *Saturday Evening Post*.

## The Golden Age

Comic books started to become a big business during the “Golden Age,” a term used to refer to comics written between 1938 and 1955.<sup>13</sup> Golden Age stories saw Superman sporting his trademark elastic suit and cape, a look that has changed very little since. The character was novel for the time and resonated with audiences suffering through the Great Depression. Siegel and Schuster’s Superman was a vigilante, battling their perceived injustices of the time. In the very first issue of *Action Comics* (June 1938), Superman took on abusive husbands, war profiteers, and an unjust penal system.<sup>14</sup>

By 1941 more than thirty publishers were producing 150 issues a month and selling 15 million copies to a readership of over 60 million. The medium was relatively new, and National Comics was in a position to shape the public’s conception of it. DC and All American existed independently until 1944, when Donenfeld and Liebowitz orchestrated a successful buy-out. Gerard Jones summarizes: “Liebowitz promptly orchestrated the merger of All-American and Detective Comics into National Comics... Next he took charge of organizing National Comics, [the self-distributorship] Independent News, and their affiliated firms into a single corporate entity, National Periodical Publications.”<sup>15</sup> The companies, hastily formed by Donenfeld years earlier, were now a legitimate distributor, publisher, and licensor.

After selling the rights to Superman in 1938, Siegel and Schuster gradually began losing creative control of their creation. National Periodicals reshaped Superman into a refined and moral role model, a stark contrast to Siegel’s vigilante. Earlier stories featured Superman as a vigilante, taking the law into his own hands and even throwing gangsters out of windows to their

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<sup>13</sup> Arlen Schumer, *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art* (Portland: Collectors Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 34.

Jerry Siegel, “Superman: Champion of the Oppressed,” *Action Comics Vol 1. #1, June 1938*.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 223.

deaths.<sup>16</sup> In early stories, he fought gangsters, crooked politicians, and other mortal humans.<sup>17</sup> As Les Daniels found, “It was up to Ellsworth to impose tight editorial controls on Jerry Siegel. Henceforth, Superman would be forbidden to use his powers to kill anyone, even a villain.”<sup>18</sup> National Publications held bi-monthly policy meetings to ensure the character’s high moral sense remained in tact.<sup>19</sup>

### Liebowitz’s Expertise

When Donenfeld and Liebowitz identified demand for their character, they worked tirelessly to cash in. First appearing in *Action Comics #1* (June 1938), the character’s popularity spawned a newspaper comic strip later that year. In 1938, they entered into an agreement with McClure Newspaper Syndicate, and a Superman comic strip received syndication in newspapers January 1939.<sup>20</sup> The comics proved popular enough that a full-color Sunday strip was added later that year. Superman also received his own magazine for the first time that year, eponymously titled *Superman*. National Comics continued rapidly developing the brand in all media, as *The Adventures of Superman* radio show premiered February 1940. Coinciding with the premiere, National also began licensing the character. Thirty-three products appeared in stores as the first of twelve Max Fleischer cartoons aired in theaters October of 1941. A novel about the character, also titled “The Adventures of Superman,” was published in 1942. Superman Day at the World’s Fair broke attendance records, drawing in 36,000 kids. At the same time, the Superman Club of America was formed and began producing code cards, buttons, and

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<sup>16</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Schumer, *The Silver Age*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 41.

<sup>19</sup> John Kobler, “Up, Up and Away! The Rise of Superman Inc.,” *Saturday Evening Post*, June 21, 1941.

<sup>20</sup> Joe Sergi, *The Law For Comic Book Creators* (NC: McFarland and Company, 2015), 40-41.

certificates for kids eager to display their love of the character.<sup>21</sup> In four years, the character was becoming available to consumers in a growing variety of media.<sup>22</sup>

Liebowitz was also quick to see the need for new content in broadcasting, and understood that a familiar character like Superman sold itself. He also realized the appeal a wholesome product had to sponsors. Gerard Jones sums up Liebowitz's philosophy neatly by saying, "in the end, there was no question who understood the business of comics, the business of America, best of all."<sup>23</sup>

Liebowitz made sure bills were paid on time, controlled expenses, and pressured debtors.<sup>24</sup> Donenfeld was the affable face of the business, socializing with publishers and industry professionals after hours and networking with people in high places.<sup>25</sup> In 1940, when editor Vin Sullivan left to work for a new publisher, Liebowitz had the opportunity to choose his own editorial staff. He looked to hire editors on a permanent basis. He hired a newspaper cartoonist named Whitney Ellsworth in 1941, and the two quickly developed a code of acceptable behavior for superheroes.<sup>26</sup>

### **Weisinger Joins DC**

In 1941, Ellsworth hired Mortimer Weisinger to edit their *DC Comics* line at the recommendation of Superman's co-creator Jerry Siegel. Weisinger's previous editorial experience as an editor for *The Planet*, *The Time Traveler*, *Science Fiction Digest* and New York University's daily newspaper and magazine provided a strong basis for a career in editing.<sup>27</sup> He

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<sup>21</sup> Kobler, "Up, Up and Away!"

<sup>22</sup> Tye, 51.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 242.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>27</sup> Sam Moskowitz, *Seekers of Tomorrow; Masters of Modern Science Fiction*, (OH: The World Publishing Company, 1974) 109.

had experience managing freelance writers, a strong eye for quality story ideas, and a history of writing for a younger demographic.<sup>28</sup> Liebowitz found him to be a great creative mind, favoring him over other editors Jack Schiff and Weisinger's long-time friend Julius Schwartz.

National/DC would become known for its hands-on editors who funneled the creative vision of artists and writers into a more homogenous "house style."<sup>29</sup>

The success of Superman provided a blueprint for similar brand extension for Batman. Max Fleischer's Superman cartoons were a success, inspiring Columbia Studios to produce a fifteen episode Batman series in 1943.<sup>30</sup> McClure Newspaper Syndicate also produced a newspaper strip of Batman at the same time.<sup>31</sup> The character also began appearing on the extremely popular *Adventures of Superman* radio show, establishing it as a household name, even for those who never touched a comic book.<sup>32</sup>

Ellsworth found success writing screenplays and working on TV shows in Hollywood and moved there permanently in 1951, leaving Weisinger in the position of exclusive editor of the Superman line in 1951. He would hold that post until 1970.<sup>33</sup> Beginning in the late 1950s, with the death of George Reeves and subsequent decline in popularity of *The Adventures of Superman* TV show, comics were once again Superman's defining medium, and Weisinger was in control.<sup>34</sup>

## Introduction of the Comics Code

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<sup>28</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 183.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>30</sup> Kimberly Ann Owczarski, "Batman, Time Warner, and Franchise Filmmaking in The Conglomerate Era," Diss. (University of Texas Austin, 2008), 8-9.

<sup>31</sup> Bob Kane, *Batman: The Dailies 1943-1946* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>34</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 160.

Weisinger's tenure played out against an industry facing intense scrutiny and threats of censorship. Superhero comics dominated the industry in the early 1940s, but by the end of the decade publishers were finding success with true crime, romance, and horror comic books. The uninhibited and shameless nature of these comics provided an easy target for authorities of the time.<sup>35</sup> While these new publications were intended for adults, the industry had no effective monitoring or regulatory mechanism imposing content standards. There was also no legislation restricting sales to minors, and they proved to be extremely popular with young readers who purchased them.<sup>36</sup> Fredric Wertham's well-known critique of comic books, *Seduction of the Innocent*, was released in 1954.<sup>37</sup>

As he wrote *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham interviewed hundreds of young people in correctional institutions and claimed that every drug user and trafficker read comic books.<sup>38</sup> Carol Tilley questions his methods, finding that he supplemented his data with conjectural experiences at nearby hospitals and falsified responses to strengthen his points.<sup>39</sup> One example of this type of evidence in his book is: "A natural scientist who had looked over comic books expressed this to me tersely, 'In comic books life is worth nothing; there is no dignity of a human being.'"<sup>40</sup> Lost on comic book fans, who nearly unanimously condemned Wertham, was his previous reputation as a progressive on social issues. As Bart Beaty finds, "Wertham's conclusions ultimately were rooted in a genuine sense of democracy, antiviolence, and progressive thought that was increasingly anathema to the Cold War politics of individualism."<sup>41</sup> Whatever the merits of his work may have been, the results were moral panic. Churches and

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<sup>35</sup> Hadju, *The Ten Cent Plague*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Carol Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics," *Information & Culture* 47, no. 4 (2012): 384.

<sup>37</sup> Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954)

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent" 383-413.

<sup>40</sup> Wertham, "Seduction," 102.

<sup>41</sup> Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*. (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2005): 207.

community groups organized anti-comic campaigns in reaction to the book's scathing critiques, eventually leading to the creation of the Comics Code in 1954. The "code" instituted forty-one requirements for publishers and employed five censors to screen comic books after the inking stage. Comics during this time period were prohibited from depicting "excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, and masochism," and shifted from sensational spectacle to plot-heavy narratives.<sup>42</sup>

The Comics Code's forty-one requirements can be broken down into six general categories. Comics were forbidden from creating sympathy for criminals, encouraging distrust of law and justice, or inspiring those with a desire to imitate criminals. Second, they could not present the details and methods of a crime. Another rule required policemen, judges, government officials, and other representatives of "respected institutions" be presented in a respectful way. Next, crimes could only be portrayed as sordid and unpleasant activities. Glamorizing criminal activities was prohibited. Finally, it was required in every instance that good triumph over evil.<sup>43</sup> These rules left publishers scrambling to self-censor and convince the public of the merit of their products.

The Comics Code provided assurance for parents that comics were safe to have around the home. In effect, it dictated the style and content of the entire medium.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately for its critics, the reinvented medium became more appealing to advertisers, who had traditionally snubbed edgier material. Superman's squeaky-clean image in particular made the character

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<sup>42</sup> David Hadju, *The Ten Cent Plague* (New York: Picador, 2008), 291-293.

<sup>43</sup> Cary Adkinson, "The Amazing Spider-Man and the Evolution of the Comics Code: A Case Study in Cultural Criminology," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 15, no. 3 (2008): 246.

<sup>44</sup> Daniels, *Comix*, 89.

attractive to parents and advertisers alike. While self-regulation was initially thought to be a danger to the industry, five years after the code was adopted sales climbed to \$150,000,000.<sup>45</sup>

Nearly a decade before the Comics Code in 1941, Donenfeld and Liebowitz had already introduced an Editorial Advisory Board for *Superman*.<sup>46</sup> While other publishers struggled to meet newly imposed editorial requirements, *Superman* issues already met the majority of them. Early Weisinger-edited issues featured Superman encouraging children to read “real” literature in order to develop “agile, quick thinking minds.”<sup>47</sup> Supplementing their comics were reading suggestions including Jack London and Herman Melville, an unusual move for children’s media of the time. Six special edition comics were produced for the Navy from 1944 to 1945 featuring a list of words used in the story, reading comprehension quizzes, and a guide to using the vocabulary presented.<sup>48</sup>

National’s policies, established in 1941, were stated explicitly at a hearing about juvenile delinquency in 1954. Sex was avoided, as “the inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged.”<sup>49</sup> Heroes were required to use good English; only crooks and villains were allowed to use bad grammar. Bloodshed, torture, kidnapping, and killing were strictly forbidden, and justice had to triumph in every issue. The final paragraph of the policy summarized the company’s goal: to provide reasonably exciting entertainment without relying on the “artificial devices” of sex and violence.

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<sup>45</sup> J.L. Goldwater, “Cleaned up Comics Sure Bet as Ad Medium,” *Advertising Age*, April 1959.

<sup>46</sup> Dorrell, Larry D., Dan B. Curtis, and Kuldip R. Rampal, “Book-Worm Without Books? Students Reading Comic Books in the School House,” *Journal Of Popular Culture* 29, no. 2: 223-234.

<sup>47</sup> Carol Tilley, “‘Superman Says Read!’ National Comics and Reading Promotion,” *Children’s Literature and Entertainment*, 44 (2013) 252-254.

“Superman Says.” *Superman #4. National Comics Publications*, March 1940.

<sup>48</sup> Don Cameron, “Superman #34,” *Special Edition, Superman #5*, March 1945.

<sup>49</sup> Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books) hearings before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in the U.S., Eighty-Third Congress, second session, on April 21, 22, June 4, 1954.



Continuing the historical precedent set by National's editorial code, Weisinger saw a responsibility to parents and children alike to use Superman as a role model. "Naturally, Superman's greatest effect has been on children," he said in 1946. "Mothers... have gotten into the habit of asking Superman to drop a line to Junior, urging him to eat his egg yolk and stop biting his nails."<sup>50</sup> Weisinger then recounted a time when Superman implores a child to have better oral hygiene: "Not long after this episode was printed in booklet form and a million copies circulated, the youth brigade began knocking on dentists' doors."<sup>51</sup> Interviews such as this one reflected a deliberate strategy by National's brain trust to build a brand behind their altruistic hero.

### Entering the Silver Age

Stylistic and content changes imposed by the Comics Code marked a new era for comic books. The reimagining of The Flash in *Showcase #4* (September/October 1956) is often referred to as the beginning of what is referred to as the Silver Age of Comics.<sup>52</sup> Silver Age comics are defined by science fiction storylines and reimagined heroes who were more vulnerable and human. For comic books from the era, personal conflict and character development became more important than superpowers and epic adventures. The time also represents a period of artistic and commercial advancement for the comic book industry, although it came at the cost of individual artist's visions. The second incarnation of the Flash featured a new civilian identity, costume, and origin story. Silver Age Flash stories, like Superman stories of the time, were heavily

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<sup>50</sup> Weisinger, "Here Comes Superman."

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Arnold T. Blumberg, "'The Night Gwen Stacy Died': The End of Innocence and the Birth of the Bronze Age," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 3, no. 4 (2003).

influenced by science fiction.<sup>53</sup> Julius Schwartz, who like Weisinger was a former editor at science fiction magazines, teamed with artist Carman Infantino and writer John Broome to create the new version of the character.<sup>54</sup>

The success of the new Flash paved the way for similar treatment to other characters. Schwartz and Broome would next reinvent Green Lantern for a new era. The new Green Lantern, Hal Jordan, was a progressive leftist and tackled sensitive social issues such as racism, poverty, and corruption.<sup>55</sup> He served as a member of the universal peacekeeping crew known as The Green Lantern Corps. Each Lantern had a ring powered by alien-science and was dispatched to patrol different sectors of the galaxy, instantly expanding the scope of the character's universe and mythology. The decision to revamp second-string characters made sense to executives at National Publications, who were wary of weakening brand recognition for Superman and Batman.<sup>56</sup> The two characters helped the company account for 30 percent of industry sales in the industry in 1962.<sup>57</sup>

Weisinger was more careful with Superman than any of his other characters. While he gladly added additional characters to other series, he kept Superman from becoming a guest character in other books. Schwartz, his longtime friend and fellow editor at DC, recalls: "Jack Schiff, who was then the Batman editor, and Mort who was then the Superman editor... together asked me not to include them in the ongoing Justice League of America series."<sup>58</sup> Both

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<sup>53</sup> Les Daniels, "Flashback: The Return of the Super Hero" in *DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favorite Comic Book Heroes* (New York: Little, Brown, & Company 1995): 116.

<sup>54</sup> Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 88.

<sup>55</sup> Nickie D. Phillips and Stacy Strobl, "Cultural Criminology and Kryptonite: Apocalyptic and Retributive Constructions of Crime and Justice in Comic Books," *Crime Media Culture* 2 (2006), 310.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), 86.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>58</sup> Schwartz and Thomsen, *Man of Two Worlds*, 96.

characters would eventually become mainstays of the Justice League, although not until decades later.

Superman was also reinvented to appeal to the changing tastes of comic book audiences. Brad Ricca observes in his book *Superboys*: “The Silver Age mirrored the falseness of the fifties: domestic perfection as a disguise for all the underlying tensions.”<sup>59</sup> Superman’s ability to respond to threats appealed to Cold War audiences. He extolled and exemplified American values as he fought villains and made sure innocent citizens were safe. Cold War tension made his peacekeeper elements especially appealing.<sup>60</sup>

### Weisinger Receives Control

We can better understand the Silver Age by looking at the background and career of its most powerful figure. Weisinger’s rise to editor at National Publications is one of the first examples of a comic enthusiast turning their passion into a career. Ian Gordon notes, “fans who became professionals like Weisinger not only held different parts of the community together in creative tension, but also established an industry model.”<sup>61</sup> Weisinger was a published author at the age of sixteen, selling his first piece to *American Stories* magazine.<sup>62</sup> His amateur experience prepared him for the work he would later do at DC Comics. Julius Schwartz, a longtime collaborator of Weisinger’s, recounts how they first met: “I came across a letter in a *Science Fiction Reader*’s column from a Mortimer Weisinger, telling about a club in the Bronx called “The Scienceers,” and inviting anyone who was interested in joining to write him for further

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<sup>59</sup> Brad Ricca, *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster – The Creators of Superman* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 245.

<sup>60</sup> *Comic Books and the Cold War, 1946-1962: Essays on Graphic Treatment of Communism, The Code and Social Concerns*. Ed. Chris York and Rafiel York (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 21.

<sup>61</sup> Ian Gordon, “Writing to Superman: Towards an Understanding of the Social Networks of Comic-Book Fans,” *Participations* 9 (November 2012): 120-132.

<sup>62</sup> “Mort Weisinger, At 63, Editor of Comic Books,” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), May 9, 1978.

information.”<sup>63</sup> Schwartz, unfortunately, was only fourteen at the time, and had to wait for his sixteenth birthday before joining the club.

The fan group collaborated to produce nine issues of a fanzine called *The Time Traveller* in 1932 and 1933.<sup>64</sup> Later the group worked on *Science Fiction Digest*, which became *Fantasy Magazine*. His beginnings in sci-fi fan magazines and active participation in the science fiction community prepared him for his work at National Publications. In addition to publishing stories from many of the most famous science fiction authors of the time, *Fantasy Magazine* served as a core news source for fans of the genre. Such publications were created because fans were dissatisfied with the quality of fiction magazines.<sup>65</sup> Steady communications from famous authors showed a remarkable willingness of professional writers to co-operate with their fans. The line between amateur and professional was blurring.

Editorial offices for science fiction magazines were often open to fans. Knowing this, Weisinger and Schwartz would often simply walk in and begin conversations with editors. Schwartz recounts how he and Weisinger thought of them as “the closest things to gods on Earth.”<sup>66</sup> Meetings usually involved the two attempting to learn about upcoming issues, and having the added bonus of seeing how a publisher operated firsthand. Insight into the industry would prove invaluable for the two ambitious youths.

Still teenagers, Schwartz and Weisinger created a literary agency called *Solar Sales Service*. The two sent letters to the various writers they met through the fan community, asking for stories as well as a dollar and a 10 percent commission for each story they sold. The letters

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<sup>63</sup> Julius Schwartz and Brian M. Thomsen, *Man of Two Worlds: My Life in Science Fiction and Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 9.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Ashley, *The Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines From the Beginning to 1950*, Vol. 1 (London: Liverpool University Press 2000), 79-80.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

featured ringing endorsements from the various editors the two had befriended. Before long, Weisinger and Schwartz represented many prominent science fiction writers such as John Russell Fearn, Alfred Bester, H.P Lovecraft, and Ray Bradbury. Many of these writers would later be called upon for stories during Weisinger's years at DC comics from 1946-1970. In 1935 Weisinger left *Solar Sales Services* to work for *Thrilling Wonder Stories* where he oversaw no less than 40 titles during his tenure.<sup>67</sup> Science fiction was such a specialized field at the time that before long Leo Margulies, owner of the magazine, began leaving the editing to Weisinger."<sup>68</sup>

Schwartz, who assisted Weisinger in locating new talent for much of his career, asserted that they deserved singular credit for establishing science fiction fandom. "Mort and I not only became agents, but put out what is considered to be the first fan magazine," he said. "Mort and I are completely responsible for the whole fan scene."<sup>69</sup> Schwartz continued to discover new writers and introduced their work to Weisinger and other editors he came to know within science fiction's social networks. Editors who began as enthusiasts were at a distinct advantage as they were able to network with other contributors and keep their fingers on the pulse of the fan community.<sup>70</sup>

Larry Tye summarizes Weisinger's philosophy: "Mort's Rule No. 1: Know your readers. Superman's, he thought, were boys aged eight to twelve.... Rule No. 2: Don't let the kids get bored."<sup>71</sup> Weisinger reportedly asked kids on the street what kind of Superman stories they would like to see, and even created focus groups with young fans.<sup>72</sup> Providing another means for fan feedback, Weisinger began publishing fan letters and responses in *Superman #124*

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<sup>67</sup> Guy Lillian III, "Mort Weisinger: The Man Who Wouldn't Be Superman," *The Amazing World of DC Comics #7*, July 1975.

<sup>68</sup> Ashley. *The Time Machines*, 100.

<sup>69</sup> John Peel, "Julius Schwartz," *Comics Feature #30*, July/August 1984, 32-41.

<sup>70</sup> John Cheng, *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 53.

<sup>71</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 161.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Waid, *Superman in the Sixties* (New York: DC Comics, 1999), 6-9.

(September 1958), complete with the home address of each writer so they could correspond with one another.<sup>73</sup> As a direct response to feedback from fans, Weisinger promoted Jimmy Olsen from cub to full-fledged reporter and gave Lois a bouffant hairdo like Jackie Kennedy's. Weisinger became aware of F. Nelson Bridgwell and Roy Thomas initially through their letters to *Superman* before hiring them as editorial assistants.<sup>74</sup>

Ian Gordon found that future comic book authors or scholars wrote many of fan letters published in *Superman*.<sup>75</sup> They formed a discourse community, a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated.<sup>76</sup> At the time, discourse was achieved mostly through correspondences and conventions, a contrast to the sleek, instantaneous dialogues facilitated by modern social media networks and the Internet. Published letter writers had the envy of their friends and opportunities in the industry. One example was the success of a seventeen-year-old fan named Charles Hornig. Over the course of three months, he went from writing letters to editors, to producing his own fanzine, to being paid a salary as managing editor of *Wonder Stories*. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, were active participants in the science fiction fan community of the early 1930s.<sup>77</sup> Weisinger and Siegel first came into contact in 1932, when Siegel bought advertising for his own self-produced fanzine in *Science Wonder Stories*. Weisinger, then a fanzine publisher himself, cooperated with Siegel to help obtain subscriptions.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *Superman* #124, September 1958.

Tye, *Superman*, 162.

<sup>74</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 67.

<sup>75</sup> Gordon, "Writing to Superman," 125. Some letter writers included Jim Shooter, Dave Sim, Mike Benton, David Hadju, Gerard Jones, and Bradford Wright.

<sup>76</sup> James E. Porter, "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community," *Rhetoric Review* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 38.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon, "Writing to Superman," 122.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 122-123.

### Accountability to Fans

A rising number of comic book fans became fanatics during the 1950s and 1960s. A growing abundance of comics, comic book stores, conventions, and fan clubs contributed to the growth of fan communities. As Jeffery Brown observes, fans built an extensive knowledge of the comics industry to amass cultural capital within these communities. Maintaining a collection, participating in cons, and reading various fanzines gave dedicated fans the ability to discriminate between different versions of a character, writers, and most commonly different artists.<sup>79</sup>

As fans became more knowledgeable and discriminating, continuity and “canon” gained importance to the community and industry alike. Canon is a term used to refer to the accepted narrative within the fiction world of a specific character.<sup>80</sup> When stories depict events that fans know are out of character; for example, if Superman were to kill, fans would reject the story. As means for fans and creators to communicate have opened gradually over time, fans have found themselves in the position to hold the producers accountable. As technology advances, fan feedback is more integrated into the production of their favorite franchises.

Weisinger avoided the issue of canon by creating “Imaginary Stories,” standalone hypothetical scenarios that often responded directly to fan input. The possibilities were as far-fetched as Weisinger saw fit. Imaginary stories skirted the issue of canon by presenting one-off tales that would not affect the overarching saga of the series. Timothy Pevey observes that “Superman could die, get married, or give up crime fighting completely without having any effect on the canonical universe.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Jeffrey A. Brown, “Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, (Spring 1997), 23.

<sup>80</sup> Benjamin Smith, “Spandex Cinema: Three Approaches to Comic Book Film Adaptation” (Master’s of Arts Thesis, University of Central Oklahoma, 2009), 9.

<sup>81</sup> Timothy A. Pevey, “From Superman to Superbland: The Man of Steel’s Popular Decline Among Postmodern Youth” (Masters of Arts Thesis, Georgia State University, 2007), 20. Marvel would take a page out of Weisinger’s book by offering “What If?” issues in 1977. The issue with imaginary stories was that some particularly well-received stories could not be expanded on.

Umberto Eco's famous essay on the restrictive nature of the Superman formula concludes that Superman is stuck in a temporal trap. He explains: "The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate... where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy."<sup>82</sup> Superman stories take place in an "ever-continuing present," a formula writers could not break without changing the character all together.<sup>83</sup> Eco applies semiotics to Superman, noting that a mythic character "embodies a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part predictable and cannot hold surprises for us."<sup>84</sup> Still, the character has been published continuously since 1938, often receiving five or six stories on a nearly monthly basis.<sup>85</sup> The formula may be fixed, but as was evident during Weisinger's tenure as editor, there are ways to escape this trap.

### **Weisinger's Big Changes**

Two important changes to Superman symbolize Weisinger's era. First, Weisinger provided Superman with a family and history. Second, an emphasis on science fiction storylines and new technology dominated the comics from this era. One of Weisinger's early decisions served both purposes. By rejecting the formerly canonical idea that Krypton had been destroyed, he gave himself the opportunity to write stories set in outer space. Stories taking place on Krypton also allowed him introduce futuristic technologies and simultaneously introduce Superman's ancestors and family.<sup>86</sup>

Superman's father, a Kryptonian scientist named Kal-El, invented various technologies that served as a link to Superman's past. In *Adventure Comics #283* (April 1961), The Phantom

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<sup>82</sup> Umberto Eco and Natalie Chilton, "The Myth of Superman," *Diacritics* 2 no. 1 (1972): 17.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>85</sup> Joseph J. Darowski, "Preface" in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 2.

<sup>86</sup> Gary Westfahl, "Computer Science on the Planet Krypton," in *Science Fiction and Computing: Essays on Interlinked Domains*, ed. David Ferro and Eric G. Swedin (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2011): 83-94.



Zone is introduced when a cache of Kryptonian weapons crashes on earth.<sup>87</sup> After discovering the realm, Jor El proposes using it as a humane punishment for the planets criminals. Inevitably, various criminals begin escaping on earth, providing new adversaries. One of them was General Zod, who would later battle with Superman in movies, television shows, and video games.<sup>88</sup>

With an extended family, Superman gained a domestic culture that reflected the nuclear family dynamic of the mid twentieth-century. In “The One Minute of Doom!” (January 1962), Superman, Supergirl and Krypto somberly meet at the Fortress of Solitude to remember the destruction of Krypton. Dramatic storylines provide a glimpse into Superman’s humanity and demonstrate his need for emotional support from his makeshift family. A melancholy emotional appeal was added to stories featuring Superman’s past. “Superman’s Return to Krypton” (November 1960) showed how the character could be diminished in strength and stature without losing his appeal. Three times the length of a usual issue, the story depicted a powerless Superman working as a laboratory assistant for his father.<sup>89</sup> “This introduction of pathos to Superman, the realization that not even all his powers could give him back what he loved most in life,” Jones and Jacobs contend, “elevated him from a mere costumed crime fighter to something closer to a tragic figure.”<sup>90</sup>

Once given editorial power, Weisinger also quickly established an extended mythology for Superman. Above all else, he had an eye for consistency, meticulously critiquing drawings of characters and ensuring continuity existed between storylines consistent. Issues edited by Ellsworth, his immediate predecessor, lacked continuity and rarely referenced previous issues.

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<sup>87</sup> Robert Bernstein, “The Phantom Superboy,” *Adventure Comics Vol. 1 #283*, April 1961.

<sup>88</sup> William Schoell, *The Silver Age of Comics* (Duncan, OK: BearManor Media, 2010), 17.

<sup>89</sup> Jerry Siegel, “Superman’s Return to Krypton,” *Superman #141*, November 1960.

<sup>90</sup> Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes* (Rocklin, CA: Prima Pub, 1997), 80.

Superman's powers grew substantially during Weisinger's editorship. Many powers were introduced simply as a way to resolve issues, often without any substantial logic. "Superman, by the end of Weisinger's term, could fly through a sun and even travel through time under his own power," Timothy Pevey has observed. "With abilities this staggering, the entire direction of the Superman comics strayed from their well-intentioned, humble origins."<sup>91</sup> The extension of Superman's powers also had an effect on his alter ego. Pevey notes, "Clark Kent... would no longer need to investigate why a political project to rebuild a ghetto had stalled; Superman could rebuild the entire neighborhood in one hour."<sup>92</sup>

Weisinger, Julius Schwartz, and Superman creator Jerry Siegel all shared a love for science fiction. In the 1950s science gained cultural capital as the Cold War and Space Race dominated the news. Sci-fi ideas, which had been running through their heads for years, suddenly had cultural cache. Weisinger was responsible for producing over a hundred Superman stories a year, and the science fiction genre provided the potential for nearly limitless storylines.<sup>93</sup>

In an interview with *The Amazing World of DC Comics*, Weisinger remarked, "It became a challenge to me... to prevent Superman from being just a fad."<sup>94</sup> Weisinger altered the brand as he took it upon himself to explain the origins of Superman's powers, expand his origin story, invent new characters, and, perhaps due to his background as a science fiction writer, establish

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<sup>91</sup>Pevey, "From Superman to Superbland," 19.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>93</sup>Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 285.

<sup>94</sup>Lillian III, "Mort Weisinger: The Man Who Wouldn't Be Superman."

“why all his fabulous attributes existed.”<sup>95</sup> Weisinger claimed that augmenting Superman’s mythology made the character “credible.”<sup>96</sup>

The fictional science behind Superman had the result of insulting the intelligence of a demanding new generation of readers. Jones and Jacobs find that Golden Age explanations “fell apart under the gaze of the science-minded kids of the Sputnik era.”<sup>97</sup> The reasoning did not have to be highly technical. For example, a character named Bouncing Boy has the power to expand into a ball, and as he does in a particular instance a bystander calls out: “Look... he’s expanding—like a balloon! He’s lucky he’s wearing clothing made of stretchable fiber!”<sup>98</sup> If the point of these explanations was ostensibly not to insult the intelligence of an average reader, they instead drew attention to the farcical nature of the superhero genre in general.

In keeping with sci-fi conventions, Superman began drawing storylines directly from contemporary news. *Superman* stories during the 1950s and 1960s were flooded with new technology, and some of the more popular appeared throughout the entire line. Perhaps the greatest feature of Superman’s fortress is a room-sized mega computer called the Univac. The term “Univac” was synonymous with computers in the 1950s. In 1952, the actual Univac found a place in public consciousness for predicting Eisenhower’s election. Superman comics achieved a level of relevance and believability by anticipating trends in science and technology.

The Super Univac was far more powerful than the real Univac, however with no limit to its computational power ever established. In *Superman #132*, the machine presents an alternate history in which Krypton survived.<sup>99</sup> In *The Second Supergirl*, Supergirl uses the Super-Univac

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Murray, “The Key to Fort Weisinger,” in *The Krypton Companion*, ed. Michael Eury (Raleigh, NC: Two Morrows Publishing 2006), 74.

<sup>97</sup> Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 17.

<sup>98</sup> Jerry Siegel, “The Secret Origin of Bouncing Boy,” *Adventure Comics Vol. 1 no. 301*, October 1962.

<sup>99</sup> Otto Binder, “Superman’s Other Life,” *Superman Vol. 1 #132*, October 1959.

to discover a world similar to Earth where she can test her powers without exposing her secret.<sup>100</sup> Superman uses the computer in *Action Comics* #265 to foretell the future of a hero named Hyper-Man, saving him from imminent death at the cost of his powers.<sup>101</sup> Superman also owned multiple robots that looked exactly like him and often would be sent on missions in his stead.<sup>102</sup> The machine appeared in numerous stories, demonstrating Weisinger's prowess for generating new plot devices with science fiction.

Weisinger's background in science fiction was a major influence on the Superman character. Bradford Wright finds Weisinger's series went from "a modern social fantasy... to a modern fairy tale."<sup>103</sup> When National Publications gave Weisinger complete control, he quickly instituted many of the editorial strategies from his time as a science fiction editor. Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs say Weisinger "initiated the policy, new at National, of combing the slush pile to discover new talent."<sup>104</sup> Mainstays of science fiction such as Edmond Hamilton, Manly Wade Wellman, and Alfred Bester were hired early on.<sup>105</sup>

Weisinger's science fiction background also helped him create pseudoscientific explanations that he provided in the comic books. *Action Comics* #262 (May 1961) in particular explains many of Superman's strengths. His super-strength and flight are results of the ultra-solar rays of the sun, combined with the gravitational difference of Krypton and Earth.<sup>106</sup> The "photo-nucleic event" of earth's sun on Superman provides him with the rest of his powers: X-Ray vision, arctic breath, heat vision, flight, and super-speed.<sup>107</sup> Absurd powers were introduced from

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<sup>100</sup> Otto Binder, "The Second Supergirl," *Action Comics* #272, January 1961.

<sup>101</sup> Otto Binder, "The Superman from Outer Space," *Action Comics Vol. 1* #265, June 1960.

<sup>102</sup> Bill Finger, "Superman's Toughest Day!," *Action Comics* 282, November 1961.

<sup>103</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 61.

<sup>104</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 87.

<sup>105</sup> Scott Beatty, *DC Comics Encyclopedia* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2004), 257

<sup>106</sup> Jerry Siegel, "Superman's Greatest Feats!," *Action Comics* #146, July 1961.

<sup>107</sup> Jerry Coleman, "The Menace of Red-Green Kryptonite!," *Action Comics* Vol. 1 no. 275, April 1961.

Nelson Bridwell, "The Origin of Superman!," *Amazing World of Superman*, 1970

time to time. One was super-ventriloquism. Another was a “super-kiss” to make Lois Lane forget his true identity.<sup>108</sup>

### Comics Reflecting the Times

Weisinger’s tenure as editor covered the entirety of the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950s, Weisinger capitalized on popular themes of family, solidarity, and technology to make Superman more American and more human. However, in the 1960s the controversial issues that dominated the news were handled more carefully. Weisinger steered clear of issues with the black power movement, sexual revolution, and the Vietnam War. While it makes sense that a magazine intended for children would not take bold stances on any of these issues, he took it further; omitting African American characters from books he edited altogether. Bradford Wright found that “there were no African-Americans anywhere in Metropolis; not as heroes, villains, or even passers-by.”<sup>109</sup> The closest DC came to addressing social concerns was when Jack Schiff, another editor at DC, fought for a page at the back of every issue devoted to contemporary problems. However, the section served more as a symbolic gesture than an editorial platform, often offering watered-down takes on issues rather than inciting readers to action. One issue Schiff never addressed was Communism, which led Weisinger to accuse him of being a communist.<sup>110</sup> Jim Shooter intended for a character named Ferro Lad for the Legion of Superheroes to be black, but Weisinger rejected it, rationalizing that “the book would not sell in the south.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Robert Bernstein, “The War Between Supergirl and the Superman Emergency Squad!,” *Action Comics Vol. 1 no. 276*, May 1961.

Robert Bernstein, “The Great Superman Impersonation!,” *Action Comics Vol. 1 no. 306*, November 1963.

<sup>109</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 63.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>111</sup> Glen Cadigan, *The Legion Companion*, (Raleigh, NC: Two Morrows Publishing 2003), 53.

### Assembly Line Production of Comics

The Superman line was at the height of its popularity in the 1950s. Steady sales required a constant output of work. Quantity seemed more important than quality as DC Comics worked at a grueling pace to meet deadlines. Weisinger was famously quoted as saying Superman was so invincible that “even bad scripts can’t hurt him.”<sup>112</sup> With the vast amount of connections Weisinger had made in the science fiction fanzine community and as an agent, he never lacked prospective employees.

Writer credits on Weisinger-edited issues were rare.<sup>113</sup> The lack of credit kept writers from building reputations and followings that they could leverage for better employment conditions. Jim Shooter offers another possible explanation for lack of credit: “Mort believed that Superman was the star and the creative people were not the stars. No credits on the books preserved his status as the go-to authority on Superman.”<sup>114</sup> The result was a Silver Age Superman who was synonymous with the brand rather than the visions of individual artists.

Many of Weisinger’s employees describe him as a tyrant. Coworkers’ views on Weisinger are overwhelmingly negative. Even Julius Schwartz, his long-time friend, changed his tune years later: “Weisinger was the worst thing that ever happened to comics. He was a monster... He bowdlerized the stories.” Schwartz blames DC’s failures on Weisinger: “The fact that DC became old-fashioned and didn’t keep up with Marvel was a result of Weisinger.”<sup>115</sup> In any case, the sales and success of Superman comics brought about a grueling, nearly endless production cycle.

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<sup>112</sup> Ron Goulart, *The Comic Book Reader’s Companion* (New York: Harper, 1993), 161.

<sup>113</sup> Michael Eury, “Superman Comics Timeline 1965-1970,” in *The Krypton Companion*, ed. Michael Eury (Raleigh, NC: Two Morrows Publishing 2006), 74. Some credits have more recently been awarded to writers.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 75

<sup>115</sup> Duin and Richardson, *Comics*, 463-464.

## Working for a Tyrant

One of his own hunches led him to one of his biggest mistakes as an editor; publishing a comic book about a firefighter called “Fireman Farrell,” despite the cautious objections of many who worked on the comic. When Arnold Drake, the writer in charge of this project, presented it to Weisinger he found him very pleased. Weisinger’s close-minded temperament drove Drake to refuse to work for him for a period of time.<sup>116</sup>

In an ironic turn, Siegel signed on as a writer at DC to pen stories about Superman for Weisinger. Siegel struggled much of his career, often taking whatever writing jobs were available, and never repeating the success of his most famous creation. Weisinger treated Siegel as badly as his other writers. The lack of respect for may have begun during their early correspondence as teenagers.<sup>117</sup> In an article Weisinger wrote in 1946, he recounts Siegel and Schuster’s creation of the character while offering a backhanded insult: “When Jerry, who could write a little, discovered that Joe had a talent for drawing, he dreamed up a super-hero whose exploits could be depicted in comic-strips.”<sup>118</sup> The subtitle of the article, “A fabulous cartoon character exerts a powerful influence over millions of America’s children,” draws attention to the power and influence Weisinger felt went along with his control over the character.

A close reading of a Siegel script called “The Death of Superman” (November 1961) bears an eerie resemblance to the author’s problems working with Weisinger. In the imaginary story Lex Luthor discovers a cure for cancer and convinces Superman he has reformed—all part of a plot to lure the Man of Steel to his laboratory. A typically earnest, childlike Superman buys the ploy, telling Luthor “Now that you’ve changed, let’s be friends...” Luthor then kills Superman with a Kryptonite ray in his lab, later bragging about it to other criminals: “He

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<sup>116</sup> Arnold Drake, “My Greatest Adventures,” *Alter Ego* #17, 3-27, September 2002.

<sup>117</sup> Arie Kaplan. *From Krakow to Krypton*.

<sup>118</sup> Weisinger, “Here Comes Superman.”

wriggled and twisted like a worm on a hook! He sweated and turned green! The last thing he saw was my grinning face!”<sup>119</sup> Some see this story as an analogy for Weisinger’s treatment of Siegel; the editor often demanded so many rewrites that it made it hard for Siegel to make a living.<sup>120</sup> In Siegel’s own words: “He rejects myself so consistently, with aggravating comments, that he puts me in a frame of mind where I find it almost impossible to write.”<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, Siegel’s plot demonstrates some of the artistic and dramatic possibilities of Weisinger’s “imaginary stories,” some of which could be questionable for a young audience.

One piece of lore is that an artist, Don Cameron, tried to push Weisinger out of a window after a long argument.<sup>122</sup> Another story alleges that Siegel threatened to kill Weisinger, and that the editor hired a detective to follow Siegel in response. Other tales include Weisinger rejecting writers’ ideas for issues of *Superman* only to give the very same ideas to different writers and claim he had come up with them. The result was often turning writers against each other.<sup>123</sup> Other exploits included hiring a 13-year-old writer named Jim Shooter, a long-term fixture in the comic industry who was hired as editor-in-chief at Marvel in 1978.

William Woolfolk, a highly esteemed comic book writer hailed by some as “The Shakespeare of Golden Age Comic Books,”<sup>124</sup> wrote an obituary of Weisinger that was so scathing that it was never published. He sets the tone with the first line: “When Will Rogers said that he’d never met a man he didn’t like, he had never met Mort Weisinger.”<sup>125</sup> He recounts Weisinger challenging him to a contest to see who could come up with better stories for their

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<sup>119</sup> Jerry Siegel, “The Death of Superman,” *Superman #149*, November 1961.

<sup>120</sup> Michael Kobre, “Whatever Happened to The Man of Tomorrow?” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 53, no. 2 (2014): 150-151.

<sup>121</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 165-166.

<sup>122</sup> Irvin Donnenfeld, “There’s a Lot of Myth Out There,” *Alter Ego* #26, 3-28, 21.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>124</sup> Eric Nash, “William Woolfolk, 86, Writer Behind Comic-Book Heroes,” *New York Times*, August 9, 2003.

<sup>125</sup> William Woolfolk, “Woolfolk on Weisinger,” *The Comics Detective*, accessed October 5, 2013.

<http://thecomicsdetective.blogspot.com/2012/04/woolfolk-on-weisinger.html>



respective super-heroes, a gambit he saw as an obvious attempt to steal his ideas and pass them off as his own. This was not uncommon for the time, as Will Eisner recounts: “The artists working in the field in the late thirties and early forties would not talk to each other about their work for fear they might be replaced.”<sup>126</sup> Even so, writers Curt Swan and Alvin Schwartz acknowledged the futility of pitching stories to Weisinger. Swan recalls Weisinger would either ridicule or ignore their story ideas to protect his strict editorial control of the character.<sup>127</sup>

Woolfolk describes Weisinger’s abuse of Bill Finger, who had some problems with money: “Mort reveled in telling tales about Bill Finger’s financial difficulties. And he took every opportunity to humiliate him.” Woolfolk also discusses how he assisted Weisinger in getting his only novel, *The Contest*, published. After it was published, it “had disappointing sales. Mort was never able to publish another, although I saw a recent mention of him as having written *The Contest* and ‘other novels.’”<sup>128</sup> Weisinger wanted to write critically acclaimed work.

Difficulties working with Weisinger drove many of his most talented writers and artists to quit. In addition to Siegel, employees including Alvin Schwartz, Wayne Boring, and Curt Swan all quit when they could no longer cope with Weisinger’s antagonism. Swan’s tenure drawing Superman lasted nearly five decades; he began in 1946 and continued into the early 1990s. Swan’s only hiatus came in 1953, when he left DC for six months to work for an advertising firm. He explains: “The combination of Mort Weisinger and the work was getting to me. I was getting terrible migraine headaches and had these verbal battles with Mort.”<sup>129</sup> No

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<sup>126</sup> Brownstein and Schutz, *Eisner/Miller*, 156

<sup>127</sup> Curt Swan, “Curt Swan: An Interview with Superman’s Main Artist,” interviewed by Rich Morrisey; Dwight Decker, and Gary Groth, *Comics Journal* 73 (July 1982): 75; and Alvin Schwartz,” interview, *Comics Interview* 117 (1993): 25-28.

<sup>128</sup> Woolfolk, “Woolfolk on Weisinger.”

<sup>129</sup> Zeno, *Curt Swan: A Life in Comics*, 173.

employee was safe or could feel secure in their position. Weisinger abruptly fired Wayne Boring after he had worked for National Publications/DC comics for more than thirty years.<sup>130</sup>

### Critical Reception of Silver Age Comics

Although Weisinger was generally disliked by those who worked for him, his Silver Age comics have gradually gained acceptance from comic book fans. The depth added through the explorative nature of Weisinger's issues is undeniable. Weisinger added depth and range to the brand through inventiveness and inquiry. He recalled: "I created the Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen books over a lot of opposition... the management said the characters weren't strong enough and they'd never go. But I had a gut feeling... and I talked to the kids."<sup>131</sup>

Norton Mockridge's 1970 newspaper story "Real-life Superman Off On His Own" offers a retrospective on Weisinger's 30-year stint as editor. Weisinger addresses the Herculean task of being the man behind Superman: "I was killing myself trying to beat him to prove that I could be somebody without him. I knew I was doing my job well, but I couldn't stand being reflected in Superman's glory."<sup>132</sup> The article also touts the "400 magazine pieces" written by Weisinger, and his "urge to write the great American novel," a dream that would never come to fruition. Weisinger did not think comics had artistic value, but did create an association between himself and the beloved Superman brand with a heavy-handed management style. When Julius Schwartz had success with *Justice League of America* comics featuring Superman, Weisinger was livid. His discomfort was evident in interview comments. "I've never told anyone this before, but Superman gave me a gross inferiority complex... Superman is my hang-up," he said "I've been

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<sup>130</sup> De Haven, *Our Hero*, 126-127.

<sup>131</sup> Eury. *The Krypton Companion*, 8.

<sup>132</sup> Norton Mockridge, "Real-Life Superman Off On His Own," *Redlands Daily Facts*, May 4, 1970, 12.

trying to better him for years, though I'm not ashamed of his success." While promoting himself, he recognized his character was much greater.

Weisinger lamented the fact comics were not regarded well by critics, even lying about his job in social situations. He explains in an interview that "no one outside the writing field really respects a comic's writer."<sup>133</sup> Weisinger and others in the industry carried the heavy burden that the general public would never consider the work they performed respectable.

Before leaving for Marvel was an option, National Publications was the most reliable job in the field. With the sheer quantity of comics Weisinger oversaw, aspiring writers had many opportunities. "It was the greatest training ground in the world," Weisinger recalled. "Practically all our writers made it in Hollywood."<sup>134</sup> Comic artists sacrificed their artistic vision and worked for minimal pay in hopes of graduating to bigger and better things. "Many early comic book creators had no love for the medium," historian Claude Lamuliere found. "They worked in comic books in the hope that one day they'd 'make it' and 'graduate' to newspaper comic strips."<sup>135</sup>

Weisinger did not step down until Superman #232 was published in 1970, bringing an end to nearly two decades of editorship.<sup>136</sup> He wanted to quit for nearly a decade. Liebowitz would persuade him to stay with salary increases. The two inevitably left at the same time.<sup>137</sup> Displaying his trademark hubris and miserableness, he reflected on his time as editor: "I couldn't learn from anyone up there. They learned from me. At my salary you could say it was a golden graveyard, but it was a graveyard nonetheless."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>133</sup>Lillian, "Mort Weisinger."

<sup>134</sup> Murray, "The Key to Fort Weisinger," 10.

<sup>135</sup> Claude Lalumiere, "A Short History of American Comic Books," *January Magazine*, accessed December 16, 2016, <https://www.januarymagazine.com/features/comix.html>

<sup>136</sup> Michael Eury, "Superman Comics Timeline 1965-1970," in *The Krypton Companion*, ed. Michael Eury (Raleigh, NC: Two Morrrows Publishing 2006), 56.

<sup>137</sup>Daniels, *Superman*, 132.

<sup>138</sup> Lillian, "Mort Weisinger."

## Weisinger's Legacy

Weisinger's way ensured *Superman* remained part of American consciousness before he quit in 1970. The ceaseless production schedule of comics required endless material, leading to issues that were drawn selectively from the zeitgeist of the time. Additionally, the growth of the comics industry is a great example of the development of cultural production in capitalism. As Weisinger understood, profit was solely responsible for driving business. Economic pressures shaped Superman into the most refined, marketable version of the character possible.

Weisinger's initial role in fandom communities made him uniquely receptive to his audience. Issues pandered to fans in a way that mirrors the relationship between producers and cultural production today. For Weisinger, finished products were valued more than the contributions of any one individual and employees became cogs in a machine. Not surprisingly, fans that turned their passions into careers were quickly humbled by the harsh realities of the industry. The low-status nature of the medium and lack of credibility of the art form created a sense of isolation and hopelessness in many offices, although the comics produced offer a stark contrast to these conditions. In the late 1960s, Stan Lee's institution of the "Marvel Method," which involved a more collaborative effort between artists and writers, precipitated a shift in the industry. Before Marvel's emergence, National was one of the best paying and most consistent jobs for aspiring writers and artists, but Marvel provided jaded writers with another option. Lee's first creation, *The Fantastic Four*, showcased a team of unwilling, alienated heroes that carried their powers like a burden. With stories focusing on heroes who were first ordinary people, many of them teenaged and with problems extending into the social and familial spheres, Marvel, Pevey says, "brought new depth to individual heroes."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Pevey, "From Superman to Superbland," 21.

Lee's relatable, human characters captured the imagination of comic's readers like *Superman* had decades earlier. As Lee's formula proved successful, tyrannical editors were vilified, and creative visionaries such as Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko and Grant Morrison would help comics reach new levels of maturity. Weisinger, however, did secure and extend the Superman brand with a strong will and boundless imagination.

Weisinger was the dominant figure in the comics industry during this period, as it became larger and better established. While DC certainly succeeded financially and helped cement comics as part of the broader entertainment industry at this time, the artform lacked cultural capital and artistic legitimacy. Editors at this time were an important but non-glamorous part of the industry.

### Chapter 3: The Superman Brand

In 2013, director Zach Snyder's *Man of Steel* set records for promotional tie-ins and product placement, earning \$170 million dollars in promotional deals before the film ever opened.<sup>1</sup> Most of the products blend into the fabric of the film. Clark Kent's glasses inspired an entire collection for sale at department stores. The variety of products ranged from a new car by Chrysler to a new Nokia phone. As an established brand, the companies that made these products approached Warner Bros. to become part of the film—not the other way around. The brand itself has become what advertisers are buying, even if it was a safe bet to assume the movie would be profitable globally at the box office. The way National/DC Comics established their character in the 1950s and 1960s set a precedent for contemporary incarnations.

The Superman brand developed slowly across media markets. The creation of brands in general was a paradigm shift for entertainment consumption. As studios began to brand themselves, their names became a marketplace of their own. Indeed, by the end of the 1950s, National Comics president Jack Liebowitz achieved his most ambitious career goal, when the company became publically traded on the New York Stock Exchange.<sup>2</sup> Superman gave National Comics diversified revenue in multiple markets.

From the 1940s on, Superman evolved from a simple comic book hero to a brand enterprise. Numerous TV shows, a radio show, a Broadway musical, a novel, and more all contributed to extending his mythology beyond the printed page. The Superman character, being well established, culturally ubiquitous, and universally known, pioneered the transition of superheroes to other media.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Bignell and Lauren Dunne, "Superman Is Already a \$170m Brand Superhero as Man of Steel Tops the Product Placement Charts," *The Independent*, June 10, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 291-292.

Superman Inc., founded by Harry Donenfeld in 1939 was one of the first licensing agencies in America.<sup>3</sup> It allowed the publishers to act in the name of the hero, often insisting Superman himself was responsible for the actions of his handlers. As licensing income soared, the company was renamed The Licensing Corporation of America (LCA) in 1960, and added new clients like James Bond, Pat Boone, and the National Basketball Association.<sup>4</sup> By 1985, they were responsible for licensing DC's characters to companies that produced over 2,000 products.<sup>5</sup>

As Bartels Hermans finds, the 1950s were a period of reimagining for marketing thought, as "traditional approaches to the study of marketing were supplemented by increasing emphasis upon managerial decision making, the societal aspects of marketing, and quantitative marketing analysis."<sup>6</sup> Extension, synergy, and franchising are integral to modern-day brands. Extension sees brands expand into potential markets and into new delivery systems. Synergy refers to the ability to control and manage these different manifestations. Franchising is the coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content under these new conditions.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter details the growth of the Superman brand from a simple comic to a media franchise. As National expanded and continued to control the majority of the comic book market, new publications featuring the character were published. Spin-off comics, such as 1949's *Superboy*, extended the character's mythology while capturing new demographics. Under the eye of president Jack Liebowitz, the company diversified its offerings, soon including animated

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Myers, "They Bought The Rights to Get Rich," *True: The Man's Magazine* (December 1965), 38-39, 80, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 150.

<sup>5</sup> Barry Marx, Thomas Hill, et al, *Fifty Who Made DC Great* (New York: DC Comics, 1985), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Bartels, *The History of Marketing Thought*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Columbus, OH: Publishing Horizons, Inc., 1988), 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

shorts, a radio show, and a television show. Superman, once firmly established in each new medium, provided new marketing and licensing opportunities.

### Spin-off Comics

Superman first moved from comic books to other media with a syndicated comic strip in newspapers in January 1939.<sup>8</sup> A full-color Sunday strip was added later that year. Also in 1939, Superman received his own book for the first time, eponymously titled *Superman*. Comics simply became a tool for cross-promotion as the brand grew. The creation of “Superman Inc.,” by Liebowitz in 1941 set a precedent for future developments.<sup>9</sup>

Spin-offs were uncommon in the industry before Weisinger became the editor of the Superman line in 1941.<sup>10</sup> His focus on continuity and extended mythology characterize his inclination for creating long form stories. In the 1950s, the nature of the magazine market was unpredictable, leading many publishers to quickly cancel a magazine when sales were down. National Publications, on the other hand, saw their magazines and the editors who produced them as long-term investments.<sup>11</sup> Following the breakout success of niche magazines such as the western-themed romance pulp *Ranch Romances* and a religious confessional called *True Story*, publishers became aware that they could make a huge return on a relatively small investment. National Publication’s staunch management style defied conventional market wisdom of the time.<sup>12</sup>

Liebowitz trusted Weisinger with complete authority over his comic line, referring to him as a “great creative mind.”<sup>13</sup> Weisinger earned Liebowitz’s trust when his innovations helped

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<sup>8</sup> Joe Sergi, *The Law For Comic Book Creators* (NC: McFarland and Company, 2015), 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Myers, “They Bought The Rights to Get Rich,” *True The Man’s Magazine* (December 1965), 38-39, 80, 84.

<sup>10</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 161.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 95.



Superman reach the top of the comic sales charts.<sup>14</sup> The two often rode to work together. As the president of the company, Liebowitz ensured Weisinger would never be fired until after his own resignation in 1968.

Entrusted with complete creative control, Weisinger expanded the line as he saw fit. Two spin-off books ran for nearly Weisinger's entire reign. *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* was published from 1954-1974 and *Superman's Girl Friend Lois Lane* from 1958-1974. The production value was on par with the flagship *Superman* and *World's Finest* comics, with many of the same artists and writers working on each project. Weisinger insisted each project's storylines were consistent with the rest of the Superman universe. He demanded perfection from writers and artists, forcing his employees to repeatedly revise their work until they met his high standards.

*Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* was introduced in 1954 in response to the success of the *Adventures of Superman* TV show. Actor Jack Larson's portrayal of Jimmy Olsen became a fan favorite, presenting an opportunity to extend the Superman line of comics further. The monthly publication ran until 1974 and featured the most absurd stories and innovations of all the books Weisinger edited. Robots, duplication rays, and a constantly mutating Jimmy Olsen designated the book as a testing ground for new writers and ideas.

When Jimmy gets sunburn from sleeping on the beach, Superman gives him a robot double to substitute for him at work. When the robot does an outstanding job at *The Daily Planet*, Jimmy must decide whether or not to take credit.<sup>15</sup> In another issue, Jimmy accidentally shaves his head and gives his communication device to the robot double, leading his fan club to

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<sup>14</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 163.

<sup>15</sup> "The Perils of Jimmy Olsen," *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* #52, April 1961.

think the real Jimmy Olsen is an imposter.<sup>16</sup> Another sees him ruling over an island empire. In others he is turned into strange creatures, such as a wolfman and a “giant turtle man,” by magic and science.<sup>17</sup> While Weisinger provided every story idea himself and produced comics in a mechanical matter, issues were still brimming with imagination and energy.

Lois Lane comics saw their title character reimagined to reflect the times. In the 1950s, the American ideals of domesticity, the nuclear family and a suburban, white, middle class lifestyle molded the Lois Lane character. The newly imagined Lois Lane appealed to young girls, a largely untapped market. With the growing success of Archie Comics’ *Betty and Veronica* (1950), Marvel’s *Millie the Model* (1945), and even DC’s own *Young Romance* (1947), a viable audience was identified.<sup>18</sup>

Introduced in 1958, *Superman’s Girlfriend Lois Lane* aimed to appeal to a female readership. The creative minds involved were exclusively middle-aged males, creating problematic and often sexist storylines. Weisinger reinvented the character for the series, and Tom De Haven summarizes his changes: “He replaced the fearless and often foolhardy big-city reporter with an irritating newsroom (girl) whose only concerns were uncovering Superman’s secret identity and then marrying him.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Superman’s Girlfriend Lois Lane* #2 (June 1958), a Hollywood producer invites the staff of the Daily Planet to join the set of a Superman movie. He offers members of the staff an opportunity to play themselves if they can pass a screen test. Lois fails hers, but Superman stages

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<sup>16</sup> Jerry Siegel, “The Alien Jimmy Olsen Fan Club,” *Superman’s Pal Jimmy Olsen* #65, December 1962.

<sup>17</sup> Jerry Siegel, “The Giant Turtle Man!,” *Superman’s Pal Jimmy Olsen* #53, June 1961; Otto Binder, “The Wolf-Man of Metropolis!,” *Superman’s Pal Jimmy Olsen* #44, April 1960.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Roeder, “Lois Lane: In Step with Second-wave Feminism,” *Fairmount Folio: Journal of History* 16 (2016), 39.

<sup>19</sup> De Haven. *Our Hero: Superman on Earth*, 113.

several incidents to prove her emotional range and acting ability.<sup>20</sup> In *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* #24 (April 1961), a computer matches Lois with a particularly manly suitor, and she seems enamored with him before discovering he's bald.<sup>21</sup> The majority of stories still revolve around Superman, with his intervention often being necessary to resolve conflicts.

Not surprisingly, Lois Lane's comics in particular have been devalued and overlooked by critics and scholars until recently. Feminist scholar Nadine Farghaly views the character more positively, observing that the character "challenged, undermined, superseded, and sometimes, if necessary and convenient, aligned herself with the roles women were assigned in society."<sup>22</sup>

Joseph Roeper contends that the series paralleled and reflected the second-wave of feminism.<sup>23</sup>

Even so, the "Letters to Lois" section of each issue provided misogynistic responses to reader questions. As Roeper's research discusses, for example, one reader asks why Superman could never trust her with his secret identity, to which the editor responds, "everybody knows that no woman can keep a secret."<sup>24</sup> Roeder's analysis of the letters section finds that "even without superpowers, Lois was able to reach a mass audience; an audience who read and took in what was presented to them; an independent and intelligent woman who had a career that was fulfilling."<sup>25</sup> Letters published in *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* reflect a fandom willing to engage and reflect on the second-wave feminism emerging in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In contrast to Lois Lane, Weisinger's creation of *Supergirl* offered a feminine hero who stood the test of time. He enlisted Otto Binder to develop the character for readers younger than

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<sup>20</sup> Otto Binder, "Lois Lane in Hollywood," *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* #2, June 1958.

<sup>21</sup> Jack Schiff, "The Perfect Husband!," *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* # 24, April 1961.

<sup>22</sup> Nadine Farghaly, *Examining Lois Lane: The Scoop on Superman's Sweetheart* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013), viii.

<sup>23</sup> Roeder, "Lois Lane," 36.

<sup>24</sup> "Letters to Lois," *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* #10, July 1959, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Roeder, "Lois Lane," 45-46.

those who were fans of *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*.<sup>26</sup> The character briefly received it's own feature in *Action Comics #252* (May 1959). Benton finds the character unique to the Silver Age of comics, finding her at the time of her creation in 1959 to be "the first important female hero of the last ten years."<sup>27</sup> Her success can be attributed to her subversion of mid-twentieth century American idealizations of femininity. After closer inspection of *Supergirl* comic books, Alex Link found that her early adventures are an invitation for readers to emulate her efforts to secure freedom while retaining awareness of the ever-watchful gaze of patriarchy.<sup>28</sup>

Supergirl's struggle is to prevent the public from becoming aware of her powers. Her main effort in early issues was to attempt to seem unexceptional. For example, in one issue she performs in a circus sideshow, lifting an elephant but pretending a winch and ropes were responsible.<sup>29</sup> On the cover of *Action Comics #265* (June 1960), Superman flies above Supergirl, who hovers before a group of onlookers in full costume. Superman exclaims, "Supergirl has disobeyed my orders to keep her existence on Earth a secret! Now that she's shown herself in public, she can no longer be my secret ally!"<sup>30</sup> Until 1962, she concealed her powers, at which point Superman allowed her to "come out."

Wonder Woman, a character created in 1941, offers a more original backstory and more complex character. However, as Wonder Woman was revised for the Silver Age to comply with the Comics Code, the focus of her adventures shifted from adventure to romance and matrimony.<sup>31</sup> Supergirl is differentiated from Golden Age Wonder Woman by her youth, which "protects her from the problems posed to feminist readings of the representations of most

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<sup>26</sup> Alex Link, "The Secret of Supergirl's Success," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 6, (December 2013): 1177-1198.

<sup>27</sup> Mike Benton, *The Comic Book in America* (Dallas: Taylor, 1989), 11.

<sup>28</sup> Link, "The Secret of Supergirl's Success," 1178.

<sup>29</sup> Otto Binder, "Supergirl's Foster Parents!," *Action Comics #254*, July 1959.

<sup>30</sup> Jerry Siegel, "The Day Supergirl Revealed Herself!," *Action Comics #265*, June 1960.

<sup>31</sup> Lillian Robinson, *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 80.

superheroines, who are conventionally eroticized in iconography that traces its origins through Good Girl Art to pornography.”<sup>32</sup> Supergirl represented post-war tensions around women in the workforce. Women of the time found themselves infantilized and living in the shadows of their own Superman.

Supergirl stories provided female Superman fans with a strong hero that fought her own battles. Supergirl, in origin story and ability, is basically a female Superman.<sup>33</sup> Super-pets Streaky the Supercat and Comet the Superhorse were featured prominently in her stories, and no love interest was present.<sup>34</sup> Alex Link regards Supergirl as the only “important and long-lasting superheroine (created in) the 1950s.”<sup>35</sup>

What are we to make of this expanding list of superheroes? Aside from being a reaction to new markets, they also were a response to popular culture of the time and opened an active dialogue with the fans that made them popular. Quite simply, branching into new markets meant the comic book market was booming, and Weisinger was doing everything he could to keep up with a demanding audience and boss.

Weisinger’s interaction with fans also helped turn Superman comics into an interactive experience. His strategy of talking to fans on the street, organizing test groups, and adding letters sections provided direct access to fans. Letters sections also gave fans a means to communicate with each other and helped nurture the creation of a fan community years before conventions and

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<sup>32</sup> Link, “The Secret of Supergirl’s Success,” 1185.

<sup>33</sup> Tim Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 16.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 185.

<sup>35</sup> Link, “The Secret of Supergirl’s Success,” 1178.

specialty stores became popular.<sup>36</sup> The success of Weisinger's spin-off comics paved the way for other Superman related media offerings.

Henry Jenkins says the process of extending mythology among various media keeps the character fresh.<sup>37</sup> He conceived the term “transmedia” to create an understanding of why spin-offs are important. He proposes that fans participate in the “art of world making” through interaction with characters they enjoy. Transmedia, as he refers to stories involving the same character across various media, is better enjoyed when consumers “assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.”<sup>38</sup> Interaction between fans, writers, and creators through science fiction fan communities, written correspondences, and letters sections in various magazines is an early version of “world building.” With the constant extension of mythology, Weisinger provided a near endless supply of lore for fans to engage with and discuss. Indeed, Jenkins explains that the purpose of transmedia storytelling is to integrate multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium.<sup>39</sup>

### **Superman Steps off The Printed Page**

Once Superman was firmly established as a comic book franchise, his handlers would next turn their attention to radio. Each medium's version of the hero would have the potential to enhance the character in the rest. *The Adventures of Superman* radio show began airing in 1940.

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<sup>36</sup> Kaplan, Arie, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society 2004), 11.

<sup>37</sup> Henry Jenkins, “What Transmedia Producers Should Know About Comics: An Interview with Tyler Weaver (Part One),” Henry Jenkins.org. Accessed December 27, 2016, <http://henryjenkins.org/2013/02/what-transmedia-producers-should-know-about-comics-an-interview-with-tyler-weaver-part-one.html>

<sup>38</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 21.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

The program had one editor, Robert Maxwell, and he enjoyed nearly complete editorial freedom.<sup>40</sup> While Siegel and Shuster's Superman was a heavy-handed crusader, taking on topics like sexism (wife beaters), corporate corruption (CEOs), and even racism (liberating an innocent youth from death row), Maxwell took on controversial topics with more subtle approach. As Larry Tye observed: "His radio Superman carefully picked his enemies: Nazi saboteurs, jewel thieves, witch doctors, and others unlikely to generate sympathy or controversy."<sup>41</sup>

Maxwell, unlike Siegel and Shuster, had the distinct advantage of experience in the industry. National carefully selected Maxwell after interviewing various candidates. Maxwell had a proven track record for providing a level of consistent quality in products he produced. Siegel and Shuster, on the other hand, were thrust into their roles at the company by default. National actively attempted to push them out, and the two watched as their control over their creation slowly deteriorated.

Donenfeld and Liebowitz had a firm hand in the shows production, appointing their own staff to write the serial, although eventually relying on an external radio company to broadcast it.<sup>42</sup> Their job, above all else, was to create a saleable product. After being rejected by major networks, the show eventually found a home with the independent Mutual Broadcasting Network. The independent nature of the network gave the producers more leeway in shaping the production to their liking.

Before long, the program proved a hit for the network, airing on 75 stations across America.<sup>43</sup> In response to the show's success, a spokesman for the advertising agency for Kellogg's said: "We had been getting a lot of complaints... until we decided to put in these

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<sup>40</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 83.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Freeman, "Up, Up and Across: Superman, the Second World War and the Historical Development of Transmedia Storytelling," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 35, no. 2, (2015): 228.

<sup>43</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 140.

social episodes. Now all the parents' organizations are congratulating us on the show.”<sup>44</sup> The show was a hit even with its sometimes-questionable content, receiving accolades from progressive political agencies. The Mutual Broadcasting System, National Conference of Christians and Jews, American Newspaper Guild, and even the American Veterans Committee all showed support for the show with awards and endorsements. Confirming the character's broadening appeal, a phone survey revealed 35% of the serial's listeners were adults.<sup>45</sup>

The show's construction as a champion of American values could be attributed for attracting an older audience.<sup>46</sup> It signified the beginning of the character's transition into a role model with a strict moral code. Liebowitz understood the success of Superman in radio would contribute to a positive image of the character in comic books, and vice versa.

National began cross-promoting their products in 1941. Comics featured a page-long advertisement for *The Adventures of Superman* radio show at the end of every issue, and likewise the end of every broadcast of the radio show directed listeners to purchase the latest issue of *Action Comics*.<sup>47</sup> The successful cross-promotion of the comics and radio show demonstrated National's foresight for marketing trends. Advertising for media productions involving the character was only the beginning, as soon the character's image would begin appearing on a wide variety of products.

The brand grew rapidly in the early 1940s. In 1941, thirty-three products featuring the hero were licensed and began appearing in stores. A year later, Superman first appeared on the big screen, when Fleischer Studios produced a series of seventeen cartoon shorts to be aired before feature length films in movie theaters. Paramount Pictures, majority owner and distributor

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>46</sup> Freeman, “Up, Up, and Across,” 232.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



of Fleischer Studios, approached brothers Max and Dave Fleischer about capitalizing on the popularity of comic books. Max asked Paramount for \$100,000 a reel, about four times the cost of the average animated short produced at the time. He believed the steep price would cause Paramount to abandon the project, and was surprised that Paramount accepted the conditions with little hesitation.<sup>48</sup> Thanks to the larger budget, they were able to produce some of the highest quality animation ever seen at the time. The finished cartoons, which were realistic in a sense because they depicted people at a time when most characters in the medium were anthropomorphic animals, are still some of the most technically polished examples of the artform.<sup>49</sup> Any worries around the production were extinguished once they began airing in theaters, as Superman once again succeeded beyond anyone's expectations.<sup>50</sup>

Superman stories in various media contributed to the mythos, although only well-received ideas found their way into subsequent stories. *The Adventures of Superman* radio show was responsible for such innovations as *The Daily Planet* and its editor Perry White. It was also the impetus of Jimmy Olsen's friendship with Superman. The show also introduced famous catchphrases "faster than a speeding bullet" and "look, up in the sky! It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman!" When these new developments proved popular, they were incorporated into comic strips and the film shorts.

### Superman on the Small Screen

Superman moved into TV in its early years, marking the first time a comic book character was adapted into the emerging medium. In 1947, the number of televisions owned by consumers

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<sup>48</sup> Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons* (New York: Plume, 1980)

<sup>49</sup> Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 57.

<sup>50</sup> Fleisher, Robert. *Out of the Inkwell: Max Fleischer and the Animation Revolution*, (Lexington, KN: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 105.

was under 100,000, with more than half of those sets in the New York area. Shortly after World War II, the FCC was overwhelmed with applications for television station licenses, forcing them to put a freeze on new channels from 1948-1952.<sup>51</sup> Production of *The Adventures of Superman* began in 1951 and the show began airing as the freeze ended in 1952. The program was not picked up by a network and was instead sold into syndication. By that time, televisions had spread from mainly large cities to rural and second-tier metropolitan areas.<sup>52</sup> The proliferation of stations created new media markets for syndicated programs like *The Adventures of Superman*. Television stations needed more content, which put National in an advantageous position.

To produce the TV show, Liebowitz and Donenfeld again enlisted the help of Robert Maxwell. Liebowitz oversaw the production of a pilot episode for the series, which was twice the length of a normal television episode. The longer run time allowed it to be released in theaters across America, ensuring it would earn back the cost of its production.<sup>53</sup> Maxwell, who had gotten away with risqué storylines on the radio, made it difficult to find underwriters for the show with plots that included violence and womanizing. Kellogg's eventually paid for the production of the series, but after insisting Maxwell edited out what they deemed to be offensive sequences.

After the pilot had a surprisingly successful run in movie theaters, the show was sold into syndication. Syndication ensured National would continue to cash in on their hero for an extended period of time. Liebowitz and Donenfeld made sure they would retain all royalties for the show by selling directly into first-run syndication rather than to a network or sponsor.

Liebowitz learned from licensing Superman's image to Paramount Pictures, who were

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<sup>51</sup> FL Smith, *Perspectives on Radio and Television* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 78.

<sup>52</sup> Lora Clare Bratten, "Nothin' Could be Finah: The Dinah Shore Chevy Show" in Janet Thumin ed, *Small Screen, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s* (New York, I.B Tauris & Co.), 84

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

responsible for producing Max Fleischer's animated shorts. In that case, National shared revenue with Paramount. Stars George Reeves and Jack Larson supplemented their paltry salaries from the show with roles in advertisements for the company.<sup>54</sup>

*The Adventures of Superman* was novel for television when it began airing in 1952. Special effects and superheroes simply did not exist on TV at the time. In fact, when the show premiered in 1954, most superheroes were facing a cultural backlash from parents and teachers. The show created national visibility after the phenomenon of *Action Comics* began to die down, and renewed interest in the comic books.<sup>55</sup>

Placing Superman in a variety of media also enhanced his celebrity. For example, Weisinger used Hollywood connections to get *Superman* television series star George Reeves a guest appearance on *I Love Lucy*. Weisinger recalled, "I had a story in which Superman appeared on 'This is Your Life' with Ralph Edwards, one where he got together with 'Candid Camera's' Allen Funt, and one based on the fact that Steve Allen looked a little bit like Clark Kent. I even had a story where Ann Blyth played a mermaid, before we introduced Lori Lemaris."<sup>56</sup> Lori Lemaris, a creation of Bill Finger and Wayne Boring, was a mermaid who occasionally served as a love interest for Superman.

Weisinger's staff also used aesthetic changes to make Superman more marketable. George Reeves' depiction in the television series *The Adventures of Superman* (1952-1958) provided a definitive version of Superman while also offering a Clark Kent that was distinctly different from the hero. Reeve was reluctant to reprise his role from the first Superman movie receiving wide release, *Superman and The Mole Men* (1951), because of the low status of

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<sup>54</sup> Scott Bruce and Bill Crawford, *Cerealizing America: The Unsweetened Story of American Breakfast Cereal* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1995), 124

<sup>55</sup> Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and The Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 260.

<sup>56</sup> Lillian, "Mort Weisinger."

television at the time.<sup>57</sup> Still, he heeded his agent's advice to "take the money and run." The two doubted the show would ever air, but it did and had high ratings.<sup>58</sup> The doubt surrounding the production of the show provided an example of Weisinger's willingness to take calculated risks when it came to the character. National also anticipated television's change in format from black and white to color, footing the bill in 1954 to film season three in color.<sup>59</sup> For years, episodes filmed in color would ensure the series remained in syndication as the format became the norm.

Weisinger remained loyal to this vision even in difficult circumstance. When Reeves's untimely death in 1959 signaled an end to *The Adventures of Superman* after six seasons, Weisinger was not ready to let it end. Jack Larson, who depicted Jimmy Olsen on the original series, recalls a meeting with Weisinger about a possible spin-off featuring his character. Larson recalled, "if they needed a new rescue scene, they would send a muscleman through in a Superman outfit to rescue me and carry me out. You wouldn't see him."<sup>60</sup> Weisinger proposed using stock footage of Reeves and material cut from other episodes to fill in the rest. Larson considered the idea "necrophilia" and took a break from acting, worried that "there was some question whether I was contractually obligated to do it."<sup>61</sup>

Later, Whitney Ellsworth produced two TV pilots aimed to capitalize on the television shows success. *The Adventures of Superpup* (1957) was a live action cartoon featuring canine characters analogous to characters in Superman. "Bark Bent" and the rest of the cast were deemed too eccentric for producers to take a risk on. *The Adventures of Superboy* (1962) was also written and produced by Ellsworth. The lackluster quality of Ellsworth's pilot ensured no

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<sup>57</sup> Jake Rossen, *Superman Vs. Hollywood: How Fiendish Producers, Devious Directors, and Warring Writers Grounded an American Icon* (New York: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 26.

<sup>58</sup> Nims, "The Secret of Superman's Secret Identity," 2.

<sup>59</sup> Rossen, *Superman Vs. Hollywood*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> Jack Larson, quoted in Rossen, *Superman Vs. Hollywood*, x..

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

more episodes were produced. Even so, DC was lukewarm on both projects from the beginning. As the company perpetually profited from syndicated episodes of *The Adventures of Superman*, expenses related to either show were unnecessary.<sup>62</sup>

### Children's Media and Early Television

What are we to make of Superman's place in early television? Broadcasters initially controlled television, until independent producers began finding success in the early 1950s. As a low status medium, comic books more easily transitioned to other low status media. Popularity has little effect on status. One advantage low status mediums carry is relatively cheap production and distribution. National, much like Disney, came from the world of children's media. *The Adventures of Superman* was profitable, but perhaps more importantly the promotional opportunities provided by the medium helped the character find an even larger audience.

In the 1950s, the film industry was reeling as a result of 1948's Paramount Decision. The court decision found against the five largest movie studios of the time. Before the case, each studio owned their own theaters and therefore decided which theaters would be allowed to show their films.<sup>63</sup> Movie studios Paramount and Columbia were among the first to take an interest in television production.<sup>64</sup> Film studios like Disney were also getting into TV, but recognized it as a place to promote their brands.

The relationship between ABC and Disney helps contextualize the television industry in the 1950s. Independent producers were gaining power as television provided access to new markets. While the medium was not especially profitable, it provided a great way for companies

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<sup>62</sup> Daniels, *Superman*, 96.

<sup>63</sup> Ricard Gil, "An Empirical Investigation of the Paramount Antitrust Case," *Applied Economics* 42, no. 2 (2010): 171-183.

<sup>64</sup> Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 155.

to advertise their products through broadcasts of the shows they produced. Television's marketing potential would soon be undeniable, but Disney and National capitalized on the medium while it was still in a formational phase.

The landmark success of *Disneyland* in the 1950s represented a "transition from the prewar culture of motion pictures to a postwar culture subsumed into an increasingly integrated leisure market that included television, recorded music, theme parks, tourism, and consumer merchandise."<sup>65</sup> The success of the show elevated ABC closer to the level of rivals CBS and NBC, and helped solidify the link between film and television. While Disney received more publicity and notoriety for their expansion into TV, and is still remembered for it today, National made a similar move. Just like Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters, Superman graduated from a limited medium and began reaching a larger audience. Disney's success in film and National's success in comics put both companies in the unique position for expansion. Still, there was no guarantee a television show would be a success.

Some key distinctions separated *The Adventures of Superman* from *Disneyland*. *Disneyland* was produced by ABC and aired on network television; *The Adventures of Superman* was produced independently and sold directly into first-run syndication. The differences were not purely industrial, as network shows were also seen as having more cultural value and status than first-run syndicated shows. First run-shows lacked the cultural capital of shows airing on major networks. Major networks ensured viewers of quality productions with large budgets, whereas first-run shows were often perceived as campy and cheap. Disney's strategy may have been more explicitly to build a brand, while National Comics preferred to make money quickly. As Tye notes: "National.... Didn't have Disney's patience yet it knew how to bottle the zeitgeist

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 135.

while it was still happening.”<sup>66</sup> National’s sense of urgency was an attempt to prolong what it thought could have been a trend. Disney’s lofty vision included theme parks and even the development of a city in Florida called Celebration.<sup>67</sup> National was less ambitious, simply maximizing profits from their character as if the fad could die at any moment. TV seemed like a risk, but for National the pros outweighed the cons.

### **Licensing Opportunities Increase**

Syndication meant *The Adventures of Superman* TV show would remain on the air indefinitely, and the show provided perpetual exposure for the character. As Superman found success in other mediums, National were earning money in a variety of ways other than comics. While critics may claim the quality of the comics waned during Weisinger’s tenure, the comics themselves were simply becoming less important. Michael Schulz has argued that comics at this point became research and development for licensing revenues.<sup>68</sup> As Superman developed across various media it reached a larger audience. As the audience grew, more licensing opportunities presented themselves. Licensing was becoming just as profitable as the comics themselves.

As Jack Liebowitz surely knew all along, each new medium had the potential to promote others. He summarized his philosophy to shareholders in 1966: “[I]n one form or another, Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, the Flash, Green Lantern and other members of our family of fiction heroes can be molded and merchandised to suit every taste—as television performers, as illustrations for magazine advertising and point-of-sale displays, as promotional products for

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<sup>66</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 113.

<sup>67</sup> Edward P. Stringham,, et al, "Internalizing Externalities Through Private Zoning: The Case of Walt Disney Company's Celebration, Florida." *Journal of Regional Analysis & Policy* 40, no. 2 (2010): 96.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Schulz, "Caped Commodities and Masked Memories: The American Comic Book Industry, Collective Memory, and the Superhero," PhD diss. (Quebec, CA: Concordia University, 2005), 30.

the ice-cream, dairy, soft drink, baking and confectionary industries, as syndicated comic strips, and as hundreds of different toy and apparel products for children and teenagers.”<sup>69</sup>

*Superman Inc*, a private licensing corporation created by Liebowitz in October 1939, allowed National to sell the likeness of their hero to third party companies.<sup>70</sup> Jay Emmett, Jack Liebowitz’s nephew, oversaw the wing. In 1960, the company would become known as The Licensing Corporation of America. It expanded to not only include superheroes but many other media franchises. By 1966, LCA represented thirty-five different properties, including James Bond, for eleven publishing houses and motion picture and television producers. They had licenses with nine hundred manufacturers which collectively earned an estimated \$100 million annual gross.<sup>71</sup> Licensing, combined with syndication money from the TV show and advertising sales, ensured the character would remain part of the public consciousness while generating massive profits for National.

Superman’s appearances in ads and public service announcements proliferated in the early 1950s. Children were a growing market, as baby boomers returned from the war and started families. By 1950, the American populations of children five-years-old and under reached 19,000,000, a sixty percent increase from 1940. John Goldwater, president of the Comics Magazine Association of American and CEO of Archie Comics Publishing Co., stated in 1959: “Kids look at comic books with the same respect with which adults look at *Life*. A kid builds up a hero image so when Superman or Archie endorses something, the kids go for it.”<sup>72</sup> Their

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<sup>69</sup> National Periodical Publications Annual Report, 1966. Dozier, Box 49. quoted in Avi Santo. "Batman Versus The Green Hornet: The Merchandisable TV Text and the Paradox of Licensing in the Classical Network Era," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 2 (2010): 63-85.

<sup>70</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 39.

<sup>71</sup> Santo, “Batman,” 69.

<sup>72</sup> Goldwater, “Cleaned up Comics.”



meager disposable incomes drew attention from advertisers because of their substantially increased numbers.<sup>73</sup>

Superman products began proliferating in the early 1950s and have not stopped since. A Christmas booklet entitled *Superman's Christmas Adventure* was produced as a give-away at department stores. A catalogue entitled *Superman-Tim*, which combined a boys clothing catalogue, activity book, and comic book into one was produced under license to Tim Promotions, Inc.<sup>74</sup> There were baseball card-style Superman picture cards, Superman muscle-building set, Superman milk, and even Superman gasoline. Success in comic books led to success, and advertising, in other mediums.

In 1955, an ad ran for a Superman wristwatch that cost \$5.95.<sup>75</sup> The Superman watch was intended “for both boys and girls,” and was part of a line of similar products featuring the images of other popular characters of the time. Other products sold in the 1950s included a rubber horseshoe set, action figures, a ray gun, lunch boxes, board games, costumes, and more. While it's difficult to quantify the effect of wearable advertisements, products such as this assuredly increased the character's visibility in homes and public spaces.

The increased licensing activity of the franchise played out against the backdrop of changes to the received and perceived ideas about the interpretation of copyright law. The success of Superman led to countless imitators, paving the way for landmark decisions in court about copyright and artistic ownership.<sup>76</sup> In a 1939 court case, judges found in favor of National

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<sup>73</sup> James U. McNeal, *Children as Consumers: Insights and Implications*, (KY: Lexington: Lexington Books, 1987.) 52.

<sup>74</sup> Tye, 125.

<sup>75</sup> “1955 Paper Ad,” ebay.com. <http://www.ebay.com/itm/1955-PAPER-AD-Superman-Wrist-Watch-Rocky-Jones-Space-Ranger-RARE-Tom-Corbett-/152393767407?hash=item237b6059ef:g:nzcAAOSw9GhYd98K>, (accessed May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

<sup>76</sup> Neil Harris, “Who Owns Our Myths?,” *Social Research* 52.2, 1985, 246.

when Bruns Publication's character "Wonder Man" was found to be too similar.<sup>77</sup> The defendants unsuccessfully argued that Superman was simply a variation on an ancient theme and that myths were common property. A similar case in 1940 found Fox Publication's creation "Captain Marvel" infringed on Superman's copyright.<sup>78</sup> National's early success in court gave the company freedom to market their character without competition. Without their successful protection of the trademark, the market may have been saturated with imitators.

DC Comics cautiously managed their characters as many developed into iconic American brands. As Jane Gaines notes, the development of copyright law, intellectual property and unfair competition laws can be said to rule over cultural texts.<sup>79</sup> Merchandise licensing depends on protectibility of the brand, only after the trademark is secure can the original proprietor transfer a recognizable character to third party producers in exchange for royalties.<sup>80</sup> Transmedia and copyright operate in similar paradigm, with Superman's appearance in various media observable as one large text.

Superman's legal successes made National more mindful of controlling their character. Part of that control is to meticulously oversee each step of the creative process and ensure they had a character they could stand behind. As the most successful studio of the time, National should have faced the biggest backlash from concerned parents. Many superheroes of time were an object of disdain for parents, but Superman's squeaky-clean helped him avoid pitfalls faced by other publishers.

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<sup>77</sup> Peter Coogan, "The Definition of the Superhero" in *A Comics Studies Reader*, ed. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 77.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>79</sup> Jane Gaines, "Superman and the Protective Strength of the Trademark," in *The Logics of Television*, Patricia Mellencamp ed, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 175.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

Even still, becoming a more prominent figure meant Superman faced more pervasive scrutiny. Weisinger's Superman created the sanitized role model parents and children could both agree on. As Tom De Haven summarizes, "Jerry Siegel's original New Deal Democrat had switched allegiance and was now, quietly but indisputably, an Eisenhower super-Republican."<sup>81</sup> Superman's transition into a role model figure also improved advertising and marketing opportunities while also helping Superman become synonymous with American values. At the height of the Red Scare, questioning American values could often result in persecution.

### **Superman the Role Model**

Aside from being a product pitchman, Superman was also featured in two forms of Public Service Announcements. PSAs began appearing in Weisinger-edited issues of *Superman* beginning with *Action Comics* #187 (December 1953).<sup>82</sup> Full-page messages offered paratextual standalone stories extolling particular values. The same artists and writers were responsible for these messages and the rest of the issues the messages appeared in, which made them difficult to distinguish from the stories they accompanied. Each modeled pro-social behavior and encouraged reader participation with issues. For example, an advertisement for the March of Dimes offered a membership in the Superman Club of America in exchange for a single dime. An ad discouraging jaywalking features Superman saving a child and warning him that he may not be there to rescue him the next time. A PSA in *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* #54 (November, 1964) was produced with the National Social Welfare Assembly and stressed the importance of honesty.<sup>83</sup> Other PSAs featuring superman extolled such values as taking care of others in need (August 1960), being a good citizen (July 1962), and donating to Unicef

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<sup>81</sup> Tom De Haven, *Our Hero: Superman on Earth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 89.

<sup>82</sup> *Action Comics* #187 (December 1953).

<sup>83</sup> Jack Schiff, "Honesty is the Best Policy," *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* 54, November 1964.

(December 1962). Many were published in other magazines published by National. All ads feature a post-script that contextualizes the widespread presence of comics: “This page appears in more than 10,000,000 magazines of the National Comics Group (Superman-DC Publications).”

There were also films produced featuring Superman that served as PSAs. In 1954, Superman Inc. produced a short film for the US Department of the Treasury called *Stamp Day For Superman*. Airing before full-length features at movie theaters, it promoted the purchase of U.S. Savings Bonds, and emphasizes the importance of saving money. The villain of the film not only kidnaps Lois, but also makes a point to denigrate stamps.<sup>84</sup> The movie is an identifiable moment in Superman’s transition to a spokesperson, quite literally, for America. The film depicts Superman as a champion of American causes.

The comics themselves could be considered a second form of PSAs. They regularly featured didactic storylines encouraging good citizenship and characters were always rewarded for virtuous actions. It was not uncommon for sentiments of the stories themselves to be interchangeable with the PSAs that appeared in the same issues.

The story *Three Tough Teen-Agers!* (February 1962) exemplifies the virtuous nature of Superman narratives during this period.<sup>85</sup> In the story, Daily Planet editor Perry White visits his old high school and is shocked to see that it’s student body seems to consist entirely of juvenile delinquents. White assigns Lois Lane to pose as a teacher, and when she has trouble controlling the class Superman intervenes. Superman offers to grant the three most bothersome students “fondest wishes.” The first kid wants to be a big shot, so Superman sends him into space; the second wants to be emperor of his own world so Superman installs him as emperor of an alien

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<sup>84</sup> "Stamp Day for Superman part 1." Online Posting. YouTube, 15 February 2009. Web. Accessed 15 October 2010. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=De6C07bmiDA&list=FLH3Me016YHwVJTpGYJoUww&index=1>>

<sup>85</sup> Jerry Siegel, “The Three Tough Teen-Agers!,” *Superman #151*, February 1962.

planet, and the third wants to be a movie star so Superman mutates him into a hideous monster using a special crystal. By the end of the issue, the boys change their ways and the moral becomes clear: delinquency never pays off. Another example is story entitled *The Revenge of the Super-Pets* (April 1965). It presents a moralistic story about animal abuse.<sup>86</sup> In the story, a man named Mark Dane leaves his fortune to an animal shelter to atone for abuse inflicted on animals by his uncle. Superman takes the Legion of Super-Pets back to the 1860s to teach the uncle a lesson, accompanied by American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) founder Henry Bergh. Aside from teaching readers about animal abuse, the strip also teaches readers about the mission and history of the ASPCA.

Aside from discussing what it takes to be a good student or take care of animals, Superman issues provided stances on a number of other topics. The scope of the comics were broad, with issues tackling how to treat your parents, volunteering for good causes, representing your country, following laws, and donating to charity. Still, the didactic nature of the books did not seem to deter to its young readers.

Sales of Superman comics steadily declined after 1966, a year when they averaged 720,000 copies a month and Batman made its television debut. The campy Batman series spoofed the formulaic plots and moralistic missions of superheroes with tongue-in-cheek humor, much like the Superman comics of the time. As television, movies, and other media brought a variety of science fiction and comic book tales to mass audiences, Superman remained marketable enough to overcome Mort Weisinger's initial worries that the character may have been "just a fad."<sup>87</sup> Regardless, ceaseless effort by Weisinger and other editors at DC ensured the character remained highly visible, even for consumers that never touched a comic. While the character did

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<sup>86</sup> Leo Dorfman, "The Revenge of the Super-Pets!," *Superman #176*, April 1965.

<sup>87</sup> Guy Lillian III, "Mort Weisinger: The Man Who Wouldn't Be Superman," *The Amazing World of DC Comics #7* (July 1975).

not disappear after the seventies, even Weisinger admitted it was becoming unremarkable and stale.

The mid-1960s represented a last burst of steam for National Publication's comic book division. National's sales declined as Marvel's increased, putting an end to DC's decades of industry dominance. Kinney National Services owners bought the company for \$60 million in 1967.<sup>88</sup> Weisinger, and others in the old guard, were either fired outright or gradually pushed out. Beginning in the early 1970s, Superman was again reimagined from the ground up. In contrast to the most popular heroes of the 1970s, an invulnerable alien like Superman was an outlier, a product of the past.

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<sup>88</sup> Tye, Superman, 88.

## Conclusion

In 1966, a Superman musical was produced on Broadway. At the time, Broadway was typically considered a high-status medium, but a fall in ticket sales necessitated the producers take new risks. Beginning in the late 1950s and continuing into the 1960s, postmodern literature and the pop-art movement changed public and critical conception of what art could be. The media landscape was also changing as the initial excitement over TV quelled.

New marketing trends emerged with the changing media landscape. The Superman musical was simply another way to license the character. When National was still establishing their brand, they provided guidelines for licensors and Superman Inc. approved projects before they could begin production. At this point, the character was so established that expenses were mitigated nearly entirely through licensing opportunities. In fact, selling the brand was beginning to account for the majority of National's profits. Cultural production completed its shift from individual artists, such as Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, to corporations like National Allied Publications.

In the decades preceding the 1970s, the syndication of *The Adventures of Superman*, ubiquitous advertising and licensing, and the proliferation of comics under Weisinger cemented the character's place as an American icon. One of the biggest strengths of the Superman brand is that it comes presold, familiar to most and with a pre-existing fan base. Even as the character's popularity has steadily declined, decades of relevance have carved out what seems to be a permanent cultural niche.

Weisinger and Liebowitz privately acknowledged that it was becoming impossible to keep the character fresh. When Marvel introduced Spiderman in 1962 and The X-Men in 1963, bolstering a roster of characters that already included The Hulk and The Fantastic Four, the

writing was on the wall. Jack Liebowitz was nearing retirement in 1960 and hired a team to search for a takeover partner early in the decade.<sup>1</sup> They struggled to find a partner until 1967, when Kinney National Services agreed to purchase DC Comics for \$60 million.<sup>2</sup> Kinney would continue their transition into an entertainment company in 1969, when they purchased Warner Bros and changed their name to Warner Communications Incorporated (WCI).<sup>3</sup> The sale represented Liebowitz, Donenfeld, and Weisinger passing the baton to a company with the ambition and potential to ensure Superman would persist in new mediums.

Beginning in the early 1970s, WCI focused their energies purely on entertainment production. DC Comics offered a publishing house for the integrated corporation, whose interests already encompassed film, television, and music.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the 1970s, WCI continued to acquire new media properties.<sup>5</sup>

While Warner continued to grow, Superman received a reboot. It happened in the form of a blockbuster film, the first of its kind in the modern superhero genre. Becoming subjects of blockbusters created fresh interpretations of Superman and Batman that resonated with nostalgic fans while also reaching a new generation. Live-action Superman films had, until the time, relied on low budget heroics, campy acting and hastily scribed scripts. Donner's big screen version elevated the quality of the narrative. Becoming the top-grossing theatrical release of 1979, the film rejuvenated fan interest in the character in all media. The successful film spawned three sequels, although each incarnation was less successful than the previous.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House LLC, 2012), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Kimberly Ann Owczarski, "Batman, Time Warner, and Franchise Filmmaking in the Conglomerate Era," PhD diss. (University of Texas at Austin, May 2008). 66.

<sup>3</sup> Jake Rossen, *Superman Vs. Hollywood: How Fiendish Producers, Devious Directors, and Warring Writers Grounded an American Icon* (New York: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.



As Eileen Meehan observes, by the conglomerate era corporations comprised the entertainment sector of the American economy and were responsible for the majority of cultural production.<sup>6</sup> When WCI merged with Time Inc. in 1989, it continued to add to its entertainment holdings.<sup>7</sup> The merger made Time-Warner the predominant media conglomerate in the world, further concentrating the ownership of outlets, distribution systems and content production across multiple media industries into a single company.<sup>8</sup> Intellectual properties became more valuable during this period, as they could be utilized by each of a conglomerate's distinct divisions.

The landmark success of Tim Burton's *Batman* in 1989 gave Time-Warner an opportunity to test the range of media properties they owned. They cashed in on *Batman* in a variety of ways, extending the character into a range of media similar to National Publications use in the 1950s. In order to make the largest possible profit, contemporary movies are always simultaneously text and commodity, intertext, and product line.<sup>9</sup>

While National used every medium and market available to them to create profit in the 1950s, the increasing size of the entertainment industry offered even more potential revenue sources. National's business model remained consistent under new ownership. Each time the copyright to *Superman* sold represented an opportunity for the brand to continue to grow. Beginning with Siegel and Shuster's creation, Major Wheeler-Nicholson's purchase, National's buyout, and finally the sale to Kinney, the scale of projects involving the hero increased. Each

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<sup>6</sup> Eileen R. Meehan, "Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman! The Political Economy of the Commercial Intertext," in *Hollywood: Cultural Dimensions: Ideology, Identity and Cultural Industry Studies*, ed. Thomas Schultz (New York: Routledge, 2004) 312-328.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah L. Jaramillo, "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, The Sopranos, and the Construction of a Quality Brand," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (2002): 59-61.

<sup>8</sup> Eileen R. Meehan, "Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman! The Political Economy of the Commercial Intertext," in *Hollywood: Cultural Dimensions: Ideology, Identity and Cultural Industry Studies*, ed. Thomas Schultz (New York: Routledge, 2004) 312-328.

<sup>9</sup> Meehan, "Holy Commodity Fetish," 312.

step of the way, Superman's was accompanied by the persistent push by his managers into new media.

In 2013, DC Comics created a multimedia universe to organize their growing filmic universe. This new multimedia universe was branded "The DC-Extended Universe." The title, generated by fans via social media after the success of The Marvel Cinematic Universe that began in 2008 with *Iron Man*, is similar to Weisinger's extended universe established during the Silver Age. DC-Extended Universe films, beginning with *Man of Steel* in 2013, and TV shows, such as "The Flash" and "Arrow," feature many of the same actors portraying characters across films, television, and web series. With a dozen films in production over the next five years, continuity will be established across media, reinforcing a homogenous brand. Using this strategy to handle the constant expansion of mythology and spin-offs of ancillary characters into their own features was established during the Silver Age of comics.

The DC Multiverse Weisinger created was a response to the constantly growing universe and characters he and his writers created. Weisinger's extension of the Superman mythology included the creation of a universe to organize it. The universe, called The DC Multiverse, grew to include spin-off characters, sometimes in their own features, although each story takes place in a world that follows the same laws and history. Editors like Weisinger ensured a level of quality and consistency in all productions set in the new universe.

National Comic's management of *Superman* could be seen as a predecessor to modern day brand extension. In order to capture a larger market and keep the character fresh, the expansion of superhero narratives into other media was necessary first for National/DC and later for WCI. Weisinger worked to place Superman in a variety of media. As the story editor for the

Superman TV show, he helped maintain a consistent version of the character in both television and comics.<sup>10</sup>

Superhero movies and superhero TV shows have dominated film and television since the 2000s. With the exception of 2009, at least one superhero movie has been in the top 10 grossing movies of the year every year since 2002.<sup>11</sup> In 2017, ABC/Disney has eight shows featuring Marvel characters airing on ABC, Netflix, and FX, with seven more planned. Warner Bros/DC produces eight television shows on in 2017, and has thirteen more in production.

Superheroes have become more ubiquitous than ever before. Time Warner and Disney, who have owned Marvel Comics since 2006, continue to spin off their characters, creating vast universes that can be difficult to keep up with. Promotion of characters across various media helps franchises maintain a sense of immediacy and urges fans not to miss out. Still, as an individual's entertainment options increase, it becomes vital that all products based in a fictional universe maintain a consistent quality to keep them coming back.

Paul Lopes writes that the recent growth in comic book culture has been accompanied by the “decidedly minor presence of actual comic books.”<sup>12</sup> Firmly established heroes such as Superman and Batman face less competition as reduced sales scares competitors away. Since the early 1950s, DC has realized each character in their stable has the potential to enhance sales of the rest. Bart Beaty comments, “When even low-profile comic book series become the basis for Hollywood films, comics appear as little more than development exercises in the context of a

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<sup>10</sup> Steve Duin and Mike Richardson, *Comics: Between the Panels* (OR: Milwaukie Dark Horse Comics, 1998), 386.

<sup>11</sup> “Box Office Numbers for Superheroes,” TheNumbers.com, <http://www.the-numbers.com/market/creative-type/Super-Hero> (retrieved June 2, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), 11.

synergistic business culture.”<sup>13</sup> However, as comics inspire films and television shows, they do so at the cost of their privileged place outside the dominant economic logics, and become more tied to the fortunes of other industries. The franchising model used today mirrors DC’s management of Superman, and studying the historical development of the franchise enriches our understanding of cultural production.

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<sup>13</sup> Bart Beaty, "The Recession and the American Comic Book Industry: From Inelastic Cultural Good to Economic Integration," *Popular Communication* 8, no. 3 (2010): 203-207.

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