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The mask and the symbol

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Abstract

The superhero wears a mask or a costume. The mask's purpose is not only to hide who he/she is but also to show a completely new identity. The person behind the mask is forced to create a new identity after a tragic event, a trauma: the experience of absurdity. Batman lost his parents, Spider-Man his uncle Ben, Daredevil his father – there are hundreds of examples. I will also show that while the superhero stays in connection with his previous “human” identity (he has a double identity), the specific identity of the antihero becomes his mask – character. V (V for Vendetta) or Rorschach (Watchmen) are perfect examples thereof. Each of them finds itself in a new reality where the meaning the world has had until that moment gets lost. They must create a new meaning which involves a new identity and a new interpretation of the world. I will refer to F. Nietzsche's concept of the mask in connection with the pain and the absurdity of existence.

This new identity created by the superhero and the antihero is not a common one: it embodies a symbol, a supernatural force, an ideal. The superhero wants to be seen, but only in the way that he has chosen. With his disguise, he tries to deprive other people of the possibility to objectify him. He wants to be – and to be seen – only as what he has chosen to be. I will refer to J.P. Sartre and his concept of Subject (being-for-itself) and Object (being-in-itself), in connection of course with being-for-others.

Thanks to the connection of Nietzsche's and Sartre's philosophy I will show that the new identity taken on by the superhero creates a new meaning of the world.

Key words: Absurd, Mask, Identity, Weltanschauung, In-itself

The mask and the symbol

The mask is undoubtedly one of the most distinctive and peculiar features of the superhero figure. With the term “mask” I do not only refer to the face-guard used as a disguise, but to the whole costume and to the identity that is being taken on. Due to his need to act outside the law and the need to protect his civil alter-ego, the superhero disguises himself, but his mask has a much deeper meaning than the simple dissimulation of one's identity. If that were his only objectives why not wear a simple balaclava? Furthermore, we must take into account that even superheroes, villains and anti-heroes, whose identity is publicly known wear a costume or a uniform when they go into action. The mask is not meant to just cover, it shows itself, comes into sight and wants to be seen. It has to be seen and recognized by who looks at it as a face, as an identity and of course as a symbol. It acts bidirectionally: it deeply transforms who is wearing it and it imposes itself on who is looking. Wearing a mask is some kind of game and a performance, that brings the actor and the spectator into a new reality.

This analysis has the goal to address and philosophically examine the issue of the mask in the superheroic world. I will mainly refer to two authors during this discourse; Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. I will pay particular attention to one of Sartre's most known works, “*L'Être et le néant*”. Some other relevant aspects such as the bond between superhero and mythological hero, will be discussed briefly. Given the extent and the complexity of the theme, my choice of selecting certain comics and graphic novels may appear as a partial portrayal of the matter. Therefore, I hope that the representativeness of the examples I have picked out will provide an adequate counterbalance.

The Creation of the mask and the absurd

Typically created by the hero himself, the mask is always highly representative and emblematic of who the hero has chosen to be. Why is there a need to take on a new identity? Just have a look at the superhero's origins: they are always marked by a traumatic, painful and unacceptable event. The death of Batman's parents, the death of uncle Ben in Spider-Man, a devastating accident for Iron Man, the loss of Daredevil's father and many similar cases. Confronting this sudden inconsolable grief and dull suffering, the superhero is powerless to ease the pain and feels emptied and drained. His world makes no sense anymore, his daily dimension falls apart and along with it, his identity too. Creating a new identity is the attempt to giving the world a new meaning. Nevertheless, before embarking on this path the hero has to come to terms with what happened and deal with the absurd.

The birth of a superhero takes on dramatic connotations because facing the absurd is at all times dramatic. Grief is tightly linked to the experience of the absurd. The need to find meaning is not that urgent in times of happiness because you feel contented, fulfilled, at peace. Suffering, on the contrary, upsets the balance and brings back the human need to find a reason in order to survive in this world.

“Der Mensch, das tapferste und leidgewohnteste Thier, verneint an sich nicht das Leiden: er will es, er sucht es selbst auf, vorausgesetzt, dass man ihm einen Sinn dafür aufzeigt, ein Dazu des Leidens. Die Sinnlosigkeit des Leidens, nicht das Leiden, war der Fluch, der bisher über der Menschheit ausgebreitet lag.”¹

With these words, Nietzsche demonstrates the connections between grief and search for meaning. Pain is unacceptable and senseless in itself and if you cannot avoid it, you have to find a way to justify it. You need to make sense of the chaos. *“Il sorgere della maschera è ricondotto al dolore. Non si tratta più della lotta per la vita o della paura e debolezza dei singoli uomini empirici, ma del dolore e della sofferenza stessa dell'uno primordiale, della volontà.”²* The creation of a new identity symbolizes the volition to establish a meaning despite the loss and affliction, it is a reaction against the absurd, which has forcefully torn apart the meaning of the hero's existence up to that point. It is not a coincidence, that most of the superheroes are orphans. The lack of a caring parental figure indicates the absence of teaching and imparting values, it is the original emptiness of meaning. Even when the orphan child comes into contact with individuals who internalize the role of a parental figure, the superhero feels the urge to create his own meaning of the surrounding world. The creation of the new identity depends on the mission which the superhero adopts for his life and it is this mission that gives sense to his world. For Nietzsche, it is in fact the spirit that becomes a child, the one who creates values and meanings.³ In the symbol of the mask, we can see the enormous effort that goes with the freedom to create a new meaning.

In this respect, the birth of the villain and the antihero follow the same pattern: *“All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. That's how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day”* reasons (!) the Joker in Alan Moore's masterpiece *The Killing Joke*. He continues, talking to Batman:

“Why else would you dress up like a flying rat? You had a bad day and it drove you as crazy as everybody else... only you won't admit it! You have to keep pretending that life makes sense, that there's some point to all this struggling!”⁴

Both superheroes and supervillains are born from a “bad day”, a day where the known world ceases to exist in the old meaning and needs to be recreated from the beginning. The difference lies in their reaction to the absurd that storms into their lives. The superheroes, as mentioned above, are compelled to create a new sense and a new identity, however they also stay partly tied up to their former existence. They keep on believing, as the Joker states, that the world before the mask makes somehow still sense. This conflicting and ambivalent nature is emphasized by the superheroes' double identity, the human and civilian persona facing the super one. The complete identification with the mask as opposed to the persistence in the liminal state between two worlds is the key element to distinguish superheroes from villains and antiheroes. Surely the superhero invents a new identity and as a result reveals a new *Weltanschauung*, but he is still rooted in the society in which he acts. His human side makes him a hero, because it enables his perspective of the world to never slide away from the common persona. Staying split between the brand-

new world he has created and the previous one, allows him to not be in conflict with the society but to be, in its eyes, a kind of protector, a hero.⁵

Villains and antiheroes on the other hand – although they do not necessarily react like the Joker, rejecting any search for meaning and completely embracing the chaos – give up their “normal” identity, fully embracing the new persona they chose to be. Both of them do not perceive in reality any other meaning beyond the one they chose. Their only identity has become the mask, the only one possible meaning – or not-meaning – the world has, is the reading they enforce upon it. In this regard, the case of Rorschach, once Walter Kovacs, one of the antiheroic protagonists in Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, is emblematic. At first, he is just a man with a mask – just “*Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach*” as he himself claims. Everything changes when he has to deal with true horror. While investigating a kidnapping of a six-year-old girl, he finds out the horrendous truth about what happened to the girl, kills the culprit and stops being “the man in a mask”, completely transforming himself into an antihero. When masks and social truths collide with atrocity, they crumble, Kovacs identity dissipates, giving way to a new mask, to Rorschach:

“It was Kovacs who closed his eyes. It was Rorschach who opened them again [...] Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning saves what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. [...] The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. Was Rorschach.”⁶

Kovacs does not exist anymore. Only the mask remains, that at this point has become his face, his one and only identity.⁷

Moore gives us another example of the antihero-villain, who has no other identity apart from the mask: V. In his graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, the main character V is, using his own words, “*the bogeyman. The Villain. The black sheep of the family.*”⁸ Openly in opposition with the fascist government of his world, V cannot be defined a superhero, he is more a revolutionary, an antihero. His purpose is not defending the society and the *status quo* but rather destroying it, setting a new order and new values. It does not matter, if the society he is trying to destroy is horrifying for the reader as well: in that society, V cannot be a hero, only a monster. There is no reconciliation with society: his only reality is indeed his mask, under which we cannot see and there is no way of knowing his real name. The mask, like for Rorschach, has become his real face. V’s identity is his only identity.

Vattimo writes remembering Nietzsche’s words: “*il travestimento è qualcosa che non ci appartiene naturalmente, ma che si assume deliberatamente in vista di qualche scopo, spinti da qualche bisogno. Nell’uomo moderno il travestimento viene assunto per combattere uno stato di paura e debolezza.*”⁹ The mask, surely, fulfils the task of protection, it shields from the outside world, hiding weaknesses, letting the individual hide from sight, escaping the power of others and trying to give a sense to the absurd.

It would be misleading and deceptive to assume that this behaviour is just a product of weakness, a way to escape from the world. It could be in some cases, but in the case of superheroes and antiheroes, their behaviour is mostly a surge of pride and strength, a titanic rebellion, a way not to be taken down by the no-sense. “*My parents... taught me a different lesson... lying on this street... shaking in deep shock...dying for no reason at all... they showed that the world only makes sense when you force it to...*” thinks Miller’s Batman during his last fight against Superman. Wearing a mask means forcing the world to make sense. In the tormented and troubled process of creating a new identity and new meaning, freedom stands out from the absurd, the mask arises with the superhero’s mission.

In Nietzsche’s work, the mask is intended as an illusion, as the only possibility that the human being has to survive and overcome the Dionysian chaos. Dealing with Dionysus means dealing with the absurdity of being. Absurdity because it appears in situations that are unhuman, illogical, chaotic, averse to life. Nietzsche talks about ancient Greek that descended in the depth of Being, “*kannte und empfand die Schrecken und Entsetzlichkeiten des Daseins*“.¹⁰ For this reason he chose the surface, the illusion and invented the rational, Apollonian masks.¹¹

The new identity created by the superhero is not that different from the Apollonian Greek illusion: in both cases it is a reaction to the grief, to the absurd. Without these masks nothing is left but Joker’s words, the chaos, the insanity, the Dionysian. But be warned, not all masks are equivalent. Nietzsche distinguishes on the one hand the decadent masks, dictated by fears and insecurities, which suffocate and oppress the human being, and on the other hand, the not-decadent ones born from an overabundance of life force and energy, whereof only the latter can enrich a man.¹² The first ones are imposed and spread as truths, although they are just stiffened and useless illusions; the second ones are on the contrary the result of the creative force and spirit of the individual accomplishing a personal interpretation of the world. This dichotomy is applicable to the superheroic universe too. Let’s focus on the disguise of demigod

Superman, who personifies Clark Kent in order to align himself with the other people and make them accept him. He plays the part of a common man and does not want to stick out. Disguising himself as Clark is an escape from his greatest weakness, his deep loneliness. When he wears the clothes of Superman, the most powerful creature of the planet, he never creates a personal view and meaning of the world but instead limits himself to adopt the picture he grew up in. He does not invent a new symbol, he wears the one which belonged to his family. If we proceed to the antihero, we can see a transformation of the mask's semantics. It is an expression of the hero's titanism, of rebellion and independence. Speaking of human superheroes, in the majority of the cases, they express through the mask their own strength, their revolt against the absurd and not their escape from it. What kind of identity is it that linked to the mask?

Hiding from sight and coming into view

Firstly, I would like to point out that the mask reveals and hides at the same time. These dual aspects are important in order to affirm the identity chosen by the superhero. Hiding the face has the purpose to protect and to liberate. I will leave out some of the more practical aspects, such as the defence of the civilian identity and the use of the costume as an armour, while taking into consideration the symbolic ones: concealing his own name and hiding his own face is a way to protect his own being from the one who observes. Moreover, the observer is deprived of the possibility of truly knowing the superhero, he cannot exert power over him because he has no access to his real identity. The necessity to hide name and face is of particular interest. Naming an object, knowing its name, calling it, means having power over it. In the myths the words which define objects, entities, divinities, have a magic power. Gods create through words, human beings dominate nature by giving names. One example is Adam in the Genesis. Adam has to give a name to things and animals and this task results in the supremacy that he has over them. We can of course even think about the runes of the Nordic myths, alphabetic signs that are not merely letters, they have magic powers, they can create, destroy and rule. The one, who can properly read and write the runes, exercises an excellent power above the entities that these signs refer to. If creation through word is a privilege of God, knowing those words means for the human being to have power over the described objects. Hiding his own name acquires a great symbolic significance: who does not know my name, has no power over me.¹³ This is the case of Ulysses, he tells Polyphemus, he is "Nobody", "Outis".¹⁴ In the Nordic sagas not just men hide their identity, but even Gods, Odin is referred to as *Grimmir*, "masked person".¹⁵

Hiding from other people's sight takes away from them the power they have over us. . Jean-Paul Sartre analyses the look in *L'Être et le néant* as follows: "*But in order for me to be what I am, it suffices merely that the Other look at me.*"¹⁶ When the Other look at me he pins me to my facticity. I am not a free subject in my world anymore, but an object of his world. I recognize myself as an object especially in the feeling of shame: "*Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being an object; that is, of recognizing myself in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other.*"¹⁷ Being "naked" makes me experience my whole *Objektivität* without defences. So, here is the disguise, hiding completely from sight of others, takes on a new deep connotation of expression of the individual's freedom and escape from others' sight: "*To put on clothes is to hide one's object-state; it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject.*"¹⁸

It should not come as a surprise that the mask frees and uninhibits who is wearing it, allowing more leeway. "*Costumes are liberating. [...] Anonymity makes people act differently or more extremely than usual. It creates disinhibition.*"¹⁹ Anonymity makes people act differently by freeing them from shame, modesty and social constructions. For the sole reason of wearing a costume, a mask, a chain reaction is triggered in the course of which the individual evolves into someone more euphoric. He or she feels freer, endures social pressures more easily.

The superhero does not only conceal his identity, but he also creates a brand-new one. By wearing a costume, he establishes his new identity, and imposes his will: the others can look at him just the way he wants to. Disguising himself is an attempt to dictate himself as a subject to the others, hiding from them his own *Objektivität*, his own body, and showing exclusively the mask, product of his freedom, the identity, the In-itself and the For-itself he has chosen. The mask does not aim at hiding, it wants to appear. It *unveils* a part of the personality of the one who wears it, or sometimes even more: his real identity. In fact, the story holds true particularly in the case of antiheroes: Rorschach, V, Ghost Rider do not wear a mask, they are their own masks. Even Batman is really close to the figure of an antihero: "*I wear a mask. And that mask, it's not to hide who I am, but to create what I am.*"²⁰ The superhero has the need to show himself, to be seen: it is the *look* of the others that justifies him and confirms him in the role of the superhero. As Sartre exposes, the other does not perceive myself as For-itself, but as In-itself, namely as a defined being, he objectifies me. In this regard the For-others matches the In-itself. By wearing a mask, a costume, acting the

way he does, the superhero tries hard to impose on others the way they have to look at him. He wants to become a symbol.

The superhero as a symbol

The identity created by wearing the mask is peculiar, mostly unusual. The superhero does not aim at simply becoming another person, he wants to be something more. This attitude displays a typical human need, that is being defined, complete, being “In-itself”. For Sartre the human being, condemned to be free, cannot attain a fixed and set identity, he is in a flux state of becoming “For-itself”. As long as I live, as much as I strive and struggle to define myself once and for all, I could never reach the Being: it is always opposed to the For-itself. The Being is neither free nor conscious, it simply is. On the contrary, the man is conscious of himself and that is why he questions his Being, it is just up to him, it depends on the fact that he is free. His freedom is undoubtedly his condemnation because it decrees his ineluctable incompleteness and his perpetual desire of being complete. In his endeavour to create a new identity the superhero proves himself extremely human. This effort is underlined by the strong symbolic significance of his costume.

The will of being a symbol is manifest, going from the coat of arms on the chest to the most characteristic elements of the costume. In certain cases, some superheroes decide not to hide their face, nevertheless they do not drop their costume and their distinctive coat of arms. Superman, the Fantastic 4, the X-Men, Wonder Woman do not cover their face and they do not pursue the goal of having a hidden identity. By acting in this way, they make clear, that they want to turn into something more through the mask. Leaving the face exposed and uncovered is a strong statement about the phenomenology of the mask. The disguise of the superhero is in this case more similar to a uniform, but it does not lose its symbolic *verve*. Dresses and costumes give the one who is wearing them a new role above the other individuals. The message to vehiculate and convey is however radically different.

The mask frightens, it turns who is wearing it into an unhuman force, belonging to another world, just think of the masks used in the initiation rituals. It hides the man and shows the animal or the machine, it shows the unhuman. “*The uniform is also a disguise, but it is official, permanent, regulated, and, above all, leaves the face exposed.*” Even in this particular circumstance the individual transcends the man, not to become a terrible unknown force, but to be “*representative and a servant of an impartial and immutable rule.*”²¹ He is not anymore a *trait d’union* with the superhuman world, but rather the exaltation of the rationality and human imaginary. The superheroes “in uniform” belongs to another background. They are not men who want to turn into something more, they already embody superhuman and terrible strengths, but they have to humanize their supernatural gifts. Their disguise has a dual function: on the one hand it reassures people, by making their superhuman power more human, on the other hand it corroborates and authorizes their power, stressing the Other-Being of the hero and his distance from the normal human being. The human heroes tend instead to hide their face, they do not want to come closer to the man, to their human side, they want to break away from it, usually trying to approach the animal kingdom.

Generally, non-human superheroes of divine or monstrous nature, that decide to wear a uniform, want to get closer to the man in order to be accepted by society. This kind of disguise, using Nietzsche’s words, could be defined as decadent: it has no intent to revolutionize or create, but more frequently to abide by the rules, coming closer to what already exists and has been accepted, to the law and common values. For this reason, these superheroes choose to uncover the face and take a uniform, based on those already used in the society and on their socially shared symbolism.

Back to the masks: the uniform and the mask have the same symbolic significance, but the first does not aim at a social acceptance, right on the contrary. By leaving the face exposed, the superhero can come closer to the man, to the uniform and social laws, by hiding it he leaves everything behind. In Western culture the mask clashes with the common norm: the moments of transgression are often marked out by wearing a mask. The one who wears a mask wants to break the rules and sometimes set new ones.

Whether it concerns a mask or a uniform, we face symbols, whose purpose is to create sense, in an approved and accepted way or in a new revolutionary one. Vattimo writes: “*Il simbolo è un modo che ha l’uomo di impadronirsi del mondo*”, further on he adds “*attività simbolica è tutta l’attività con cui l’uomo plasma il mondo secondo la propria ragione, la propria volontà, il proprio amore, la propria immagine.*”²² The symbolic activity mentioned by Vattimo follows Nietzsche’s reflections and considerations and is performed by the man who faces the world interpreting it and giving it a meaning.²³ In the decadent society the man uses principally crystalized symbols, namely old meaning and value creations imposed by the society, ethics and law. The uniform belongs to this category. The mask instead

disturbs and creates. The one who wears the mask, creates it *ex novo*, inventing a new symbol, and in so doing, new values and new meanings. Who is indeed the creator and the user of the mask? Children, artists and, lastly, the *Übermensch*. By wearing a costume, the superheroes create a new identity, new values and a new conception of the world, getting away from the community. The same happens for the Beyond-Man, his life is an artwork – he creates meaning in life.²⁴ The superheroes that are outsiders of the society wear a uniform in order to fit in – Superman is for example an alien.

In both cases, whether it is a man who wants to keep distance from the society, or it is a demigod trying to become integrated, the typical superhero duality is present. This is a highly problematic aspect: staying in a liminal state, partially separated partially integrated in the society, the superhero becomes innovator and conservative at the same time, defender of *the status quo* and revolutionary. This paradox is evident to a greater or lesser extent in each superhero. It disappears when we consider villains and antiheroes: the separation from the old interpretation theories of the world is sharp and final. From this point of view villains and antiheroes are closer to embody the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, destroyer of old masks and creator of new ones.

Superman and Batman: their worlds through their costumes

We already focused on the semiotic dimension of the superheroes, but which is their concrete reference in the real world? Let us investigate this matter taking as example symbolic frameworks of two of the most emblematic superheroes as remote from one another as appears possible: Superman and Batman. The first one is a heroic Defensor of the *status quo par excellence* and champion of the Christian moral, the second one supports antiheroic and nihilistic positions. To better understand the universe evocated through their costumes and how their way to disguise affects their worlds, it is necessary to dwell upon their coat of arms, which is a good starting point to untangle the knot.

Superman's coat of arms' colours are red and yellow on a light blue background. Each of these colours remind us of a bright day without clouds, the yellow reminds us of the sun, the red of the fire and the light blue of course of the sky. It is indeed from the sun that Superman derives his powers, he is moreover a bright and cheerful superhero. He flies high, but everyone can see him. Two of his colours are warm and well visible, they express passion, strength and *magnificence*. Everything reminds us of the light, the hope and the salvation, which comes from above, from the sky precisely. In Superman a penetrating Judaic-Christian legacy is recognizable, his creators, Shuster and Siegel, both Jews, come up with this character as a counterpart of the myth of the aryan Nazi Beyond-Man. The Christian symbolism is to see in the forms of the costume too. Even if it is not plain at first sight, the yellow shapes, delimited from the "S", compose two fish, this is a clear Christian reference.²⁵ The "S" is not just the initial letter of Superman, but of Saviour as well. The true name of Superman, Kal-El, contains the Jewish particle "El", "God". The "S" is inserted in a diamond, symbol of strength, constancy, resistance, incorruptibility. The diamond shape barely holds the "S", indicating extreme power about to explode.²⁶ The coat of arms is enormous, it completely covers Superman's chest, the steel man *cannot go unnoticed*. The costume, as has already been said, is a kind of uniform, Superman does not hide his face, he wants desperately to belong to the community, his true disguise is actually Clark Kent!

The symbol of Batman, instead, shares a completely different reality. The first thing to point out is the absence of the edging in the first apparition of the coat of arms, the contouring was added in the *Silver Age* and disappeared again in the *Dark Age*, when Batman approaches more and more the antiheroism. We can analyse the vanishing of the edges following the revolutionary story of Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns*. In the first costume that Batman wears, the coat of arms is inserted in a circle on a yellow background. This one disappears going further in the narration in step with the progressive transformation of Batman into an antihero. Every limitation vanishes, just the bat stays, namely his vision of the world, his rules: "*Tonight I am the law*" screams at the end the Dark Knight to those who are going to become his followers.²⁷ Not just the boarder that surrounds the bat disappears but even the only warm colour of the costume. Yellow refers to the bond with light and day and with the normal human activities. When it vanishes, Batman gets darker and even more nocturnal. It is in the dark that unhuman potencies act and run wild, it is during the night that fears and human irrationality come to life. Yellow and other warm and vivid tones are carried by Robin, who represents the last bond of Batman with the world and the men. The dominant colours are black and grey – or a dark blue tone in some less harsh versions. These colours refer to the night and have the purpose to hide rather than to show. Even the figure of the black bat on a grey background appears less if compared to the combo red-light blue of Superman. Batman's coat of arms has to hide and at the same time show itself. He has to vanish in the night, he cannot be seen, if he does not decide to, and when he appears, he has to frighten, terrorize and terrify. He has to behave like a shadow, whose existence is uncertain and doubtful. If everyone is able to see Superman, the figure of Batman wavers between reality and legend: "*to much of the city I am a ghost. An urban bogeyman often discussed but*

rarely seen, more vivid in rumor than reality.”²⁸ As V, as Rorschach, Batman is often seen as a monster – bogeyman – rather than a saviour. The one who sees him, the criminal, talks about him in a whisper, full of fear and superstition. Seeing Superman is reassuring and encouraging, gives hope. Seeing Batman makes uneasy, gets upset and scared. The shape of the bat is kept in the sharp-edged and angular strokes, it reminds of blades. If the “S” of Superman is an impenetrable shield, the bat of Batman is mostly a wound, a rift. Bruce Wayne becomes Batman on account of the always present gash which turns him - a black scar that shows an always present grief. Becoming Batman and being Batman means deep suffering. This scar is directly relatable to his dramatic origins, to the inner pain from which the mask is born.²⁹

I would like to introduce just one last observation about the relationship of both of them with the figure of the father. Superman wears the symbol of his family, of the El. He does not create a new interpretation of things, he pursues a path on the basis of his familiar world and of the point of view of his parents, to whom he stays anchored. Batman makes his bond with his father explicit by pronouncing these words: “*yes father. I shall become a bat*”³⁰ murmurs Bruce when a bat breaks into his window and alights on the bust of this father. In this case yet, although the ripping of the bat recalls a past tragedy, this becomes the explanation of it. Bruce is that one who *interprets* what he thinks he may be the will of the father and in this way, he creates a meaning of his no-sense pain.

These are just a few examples of how the symbol and the mask reflect the identity of the hero and the sense of his world. Let me briefly mention some others: Wolverine is characterized by his claws, which refer to his animal fury. Captain America wears the American flag and he is the most strenuous Defensor of the American Creed, in the same way as Superman with who he shares almost the same colours. Cap’s costume is provided with a distinctive shield, just like Superman’s “S” is a shield. Hulk has no costume or symbol, because he turns into a big furious greyish green giant out of control. No symbol, no costume, no control, no purpose, just a blind destructive rage. Revealing is the fact that during the transformation the first thing to be torn apart is Banner’s dress, also, in a metaphorical way, his identity. The same process could be applied to any superhero. It becomes than clearer how symbol and mask mirror the hero’s being, his perspective, his acting, his values, his truth. The symbol stands of course for the status of the hero – superior, dangerous, disturbing, different – stands for his defensive weapons – such as a shield, or an invisibility cloak, that can arouse respect, alarm, acquiescence, but above all the symbol defines what the superhero *is*. Along with the being of the superhero it defines the world in which he moves, that rather bends itself to the perception of the hero. The city of Metropolis, the city of Superman is bright as he is, Gotham, the city of Batman, dark and mad.³¹ The Fantastic 4 are worshipped by the same crowds who are scared of and despise the X-Men. The sparkling skyscrapers of the city of Spiderman are the other side of the coin of the Daredevil’s New York grimy alleys. Through the symbol the superhero can reinterpret himself and the world surrounding him, taking somehow possession of it: the district becomes his district, the city his city. The one who enters this new world dimension has to submit to new laws, new values, new logics, those of the superhero.



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He speaks fluently German, English and Italian. He has a passion for the world of superheroes and his *favourite* character is the Cape Crusader, Batman. When he does not read comics, he plays the violin.

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¹Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral. Kritische Studienausgabe* Herausgegeben von Colli G. und Montinari M. DTV de Gruyter, München 2014. P. 411.

²Vattimo Giovanni, *Il soggetto e la maschera. Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione*. Bompiani, Milano 2007.P. 19.

³*Von den drei Verwandlungen*. Nietzsche Friedrich, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Kritische Studienausgabe* Herausgegeben von Colli G. und Montinari M. DTV de Gruyter, München 2016. P. 29-31.

⁴Moore Alan (Writer), Bolland Brian (Artist), *The killing joke*. DC Comics, Marblehead 2016.

⁵The double identity is one of the most distinctive elements of the superhero. Peter Coogan defines it as “the clearest marker of the superhero genre” (Coogan P., *The hero defines the genre, the genre defines the hero*. In: Rosenberg Robin S., Coogan Peter (Edited by) *What is a superhero?* Oxford University Press, New York 2013. P. 6), according to his analysis it is composed of two constituents: costume and codename. This definition, as it stands, it is not truly suitable for superhero comics because Coogan leaves out the dual aspect itself which defines de facto the superhero. Antiheroes and Villains use codenames and costumes too, but they do not have a double identity: they do not have a mask, this is the case of the Punisher or Lex Luthor – or they do have a mask, which however has become their only one identity, for example Joker, V, Rorschach. It is no coincidence that when the superhero starts to approach nearer the antiheroism or the criminal dimension, the distance between the two identities decreases. The double identity allows the superhero to stay in the liminal state, to be human and superhuman, hero and criminal. Such an example can be found in the story of Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller Frank, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. DC Comics, Burbank 1986) and in the Daredevil’s saga of Bendis. *Batman*: Cfr. Bendis Brian Michael (Writer), Maleev Alex (Artist), *Devil. Decalogo & Le carte di Murdock*. Trad. Italiana di Scatasta G. e Plazzi A. Marvel Comics/Panini Comics, Modena 2005/2011. *Devil. La vedova & L’età dell’oro*. Trad. Italiana di Ronchetti P. e Scatasta G. Marvel Comics/Panini Comics, Modena 2004/2011., *Supereroi. Le leggende Marvel II. Devil. La cupola – Scoperto*. Trad. Italiana di Ronchetti P. Marvel Comics/Panini Comics, Milano 2001/2011. *Daredevil. Ultimate collection. Book 2*. Marvel Comics, New York 2016/2017.Brubaker Ed (Writer), Lark Michael, Azaceta Paul (Artists), *Daredevil. Return of the king*. Marvel Comics, New York 2009.)

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⁹Vattimo G., *Il soggetto e la maschera*, p. 17-18.

¹⁰Nietzsche F., *Die Geburt der Tragödie. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen. Kritische Studienausgabe* Herausgegeben von Colli G. und Montinari M. DTV de Gruyter, München 2015. P. 35.

¹¹“*Diese Griechen waren oberflächlich – aus Tiefe!*” Nietzsche Friedrich, *Morgenröte. Idyllen aus Messina. Die fröhliche Wissenschaft. Kritische Studienausgabe* Herausgegeben von Colli G. und Montinari M. DTV de Gruyter, München 2011. P. 352.

¹²“*La maschera decadente è il travestimento dell’uomo debole della civiltà storicistica, e in generale ogni maschera nata unicamente dall’insicurezza e dalla paura; mentre la maschera non decadente sarebbe quella che nasce dalla sovrabbondanza e dalla libera forza plastica del dionisiaco.*” Vattimo G. *Il soggetto e la maschera*, p. 32.

¹³Chiesa Isnardi Gianna, *I miti nordici. Storie, figure, simboli*. Longanesi, Trebaseleghe 2016. P.89-104.

¹⁴Ieranò Giorgio, *Eroi. Le grandi saghe della mitologia greca*. Sonzogno, Venezia 2017. P. 248-249.

¹⁵Chiesa Isnardi G., *I miti nordici*, p.614.

¹⁶Sartre Jean-Paul, *Being and nothingness: an essay in phenomenological ontology*. Trad. Inglese di Hazel Estella Barnes. Citadel Press, New York 2001. P. 262

¹⁷Idem p. 288

¹⁸Ibidem.

¹⁹Langley Travis, *Batman and psychology. A dark and stormy knight*. John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken 2012. P. 62-63.

²⁰Ibidem.

²¹Caillois Roger, *Man, play and games*. Trad. inglese di Meyer Barash. University of Illinois Press, Urbana 2001. P. 132.

²²Vattimo G. *Il soggetto e la maschera*, p. 292.

²³“*La libertà del simbolico [---] riguarda l’intera attività attraverso cui l’uomo si appropria del mondo*”. Idem, p. 303.

²⁴“La libertà dei simboli [...] si dà nella stessa esistenza storico-concreta dell'uomo. Diventa arte, cioè libera produzione simbolica, tutta l'attività dell'uomo nel mondo. [...] Il mondo stesso diventa un'opera d'arte.” Idem P. 306

²⁵Baio Ivan, *Supereroi. Araldica e simbologia dell'eroismo dai miti classici a Superman e The Authority*. Pref. di Brancato S. Tenué, Cisterna di Latina 2006. P. 79.

²⁶Idem, p. 76-78.

²⁷Miller F., *The Dark Knight Returns*.

²⁸Dini Paul (Writer), Ross Alex (Artist), *Absolute Justice League: the world's greatest super-heroes*. DC Comics, Burbank 2017.

²⁹Baio I., *Araldica*, p. 59, 83, 86, 88.

³⁰Miller Frank (Writer), Mazzucchelli David (Artist), *Batman. Year one*. DC Comics, Burbank 2005.

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