

dymki, w wypadku braku polskich przekładów, na potrzeby leksykonu przetłumaczono, co ma niebagatelne znaczenie w sytuacji, kiedy blisko połowa z nich nie ma swoich polskich edycji.

We *Wstępie* Sebastian J. Konefał napisał, że przygotowany tom „jest wyrazem miłości do tej rozwijającej się dziedziny sztuki”²¹, ale również pasji jej autorów i wydawcy ukazywania w inspirujący sposób polskim czytelnikom nowych zjawisk. A z perspektywy badacza współczesnych tekstów narracyjnych i kultury popularnej jest on publikacją, która wkrótce ze względu na swój przedmiot, wartość merytoryczną i poziom opracowania edytorskiego stanie się pozycją kanoniczną dla podejmujących dalsze badania nad ulegającą nobilitacji w kulturze współczesnej powieścią graficzną.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

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A Different Outlook on the American Comic Book

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Review: Anthony R. Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema. The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre*, Routledge, New York 2014, 216 pp.

Słowa kluczowe: komiks amerykański, superbohater, teologia, monomit, Joseph Campbell

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Comics studies are one of those academic disciplines devoted to popular culture which always enthusiastically welcome new additions to its critical canon. The recently published *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema. The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre* by Anthony R. Mills is a new extension to an already substantial collection of texts focusing on the phenomenon of American comics. This particular publication approaches the problem from a rather different perspective than before. Instead of focusing on the poetics or the history of the medium it offers a theological insight into both comic books and films based on them. As such, it is not only a brief revision of the history of American superhero comics and themes utilized by them, but also a philosophical study. The book is basically an exploration of the so called ‘American monomyth’ from a theological perspective. The author’s main goal is to connect views of various American theologians with themes employed by comic book artists and

editors, in particular those associated with Marvel Comics, to eventually present their common origin and correspondence.

The main focus of the book are comic book titles published by Marvel Comics under the editorship of Stan Lee, who, as the author argues, initiated a shift which changed the face of the American superhero comics, incorporating more complex ethical and political notions entrenched in the American culture. The book consists of six chapters, the final one being the conclusion. The overall structure can be described as mostly clear and symmetric, with certain inconsistencies near the end of the work. Chapters one to four follow a fixed structure: historical introduction, analysis, and summary, whereas chapter five stands out as a straightforward analysis of various film productions based on the Marvel comic books.

As the author argues, as a result of “a thriving popular fiction market of adventure, science fiction, and romance; and second, a less reliable market for newspaper comic strip reprints compiled into book form”¹, American superhero comics are a unique phenomenon that focuses on exploration of the identity of its characters in conjunction with their socio-historical backgrounds². They originate from variety of narrative forms, including written texts and multi-frame narrative art³. Mills’ book attempts to delve deeper into the poetics and narrative structure of American comics by pointing to the fact that, in addition to the aforementioned components of comics, the ‘American hero mythology’ stems from historical, philosophical, and theological factors associated with the foundation and the development of the American culture, in particular “puritanism, liberal Protestantism, frontier expansion, Western literature, national independence from England, and cultural separation from Europe”⁴. Theology becomes a key point of reference for Mills, who employs it extensively in his analysis and theoretical deliberations, claiming that Puritan religion and Christian thought played a key part in the definition of humanity one can locate in certain comic book titles. Assumptions originating from the Puritan and Christian thought were to supposedly shape characters, stories, and convey specific ideas — compassion, mercy, responsibility, altruism among others — to comic book readers⁵.

In the course of the analysis Mills assumes an interesting perspective, perceiving the subject matter through the prism of the anthropological thought. He organizes the analysis and methodological content under the headings of main

¹ R.S. Petersen, *Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels. A History of Graphic Narratives*, Praeger, Santa Barbara (CA) 2011, pp. 1–20.

² V. Elmwood, *Fictional Auto/Biography and Graphic Lives in Watchmen*, [in:] *Graphic Subjects. Critical Essays on autobiography and graphic novels*, ed. M.A. Chaney, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison (WI) 2011, p. 225.

³ R.S. Petersen, op. cit., p. 133.

⁴ A.R. Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema. The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre*, Routledge, New York 2014, p. 1.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 5–7.

disciplines of philosophy: ontology (which he utilizes to talk about the human being), epistemology (used to describe human knowing in comics), and ethics (all the guidelines connected with acting in comic books). The utilized division allows the author to systematize various superhero attributes and eventually trace the historical evolution of the human paradigm presented in the American superhero comics.

The opening chapter — *The Historical and Theological Background on the Anthropology of the American Monomyth* — provides a necessary theoretical background on the basic premise of the American superhero model. The author presents definitions of contested theoretical concepts. He introduces the notion of monomyth developed by Joseph Campbell and its modification — the American monomyth — defined by Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence. These in turn are discussed within the context of epistemology, ontology, and ethics to exhibit anthropological notions which helped shape the overall structure and mentality of the superhero comics of the Golden Age.

Chapter two — *The Anthropology of the American Monomyth in Golden Age Super Hero Comics* — focuses on the elements of the monomyth and its American variation realized in publications between the 1939 and 1961. It is a mere historical synopsis which defines the anthropological premise of the American superhero comic book, namely heroic independence, individuality, self-reliance, and self-granted authority which were all, as Mills maintains, contested in the following period.

Chapter three — *The Turn to Relationality in American Theological Anthropology* — serves as an introduction to the ideological premise which supposedly was realized in years following the Golden Age. Mills focuses on the opinions and texts of five American theologians: Thomas Merton, James Cone, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Catherine Keller, and LeRon Shults, whose views are organized alongside the axis of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. The author attempts to argue that theological assumptions expressed in various decades of the 20th century were in fact changing towards relational ontology, which also transformed epistemological and ethical concepts. As a result, American theologians were to reject the concept of the American monomyth and eventually replace its static human being with a dynamic and relational creature that is holistic, intimate, vulnerable, and compassionate. These ideas would stand in stark contrast to comic books of the Golden Age but would correlate with the ideological premise of Marvel titles published during the Silver Age.

Chapter four — *The Turn to Reality in Silver Age Superhero Comics and Beyond* — discusses the innovations to the superhero formula brought by Stanley Lee and Marvel Comics. Mills argues that on many levels Marvel publications of the Silver Age challenged many of the assumptions of the American monomyth, offering imperfect heroes troubled by daily mores. Emphasizing the role of Lee in shaping the characters and lives of most of the presented heroes, he concludes that

Marvel offered a viable alternative to the already established tropes. Thus heroes were no longer idealized individuals living outside of the established social order but real human beings.

Chapter five, *Subverting the Anthropology of the American Monomyth in Marvel Comics Superhero Films*, applies the assumptions made in previous chapters to theatrical productions based on Marvel comics. The author analyses titles such as: *Blade* trilogy, the *X-Men* films (with the exception of *Days of Future Past*), *Spiderman* trilogy by Sam Raimi, *Daredevil*, *Elektra*, *The Punisher*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Ghost Rider*, *The Hulk*, *Iron Man*, *Thor*, and *Captain America*, to prove that even Marvel film productions continue the tradition of offering an alternative to the American monomyth.

The book ends with the summary of all observations, which the author employs to define the human being advocated by Marvel productions and publications, reiterating the contestation of the American monomyth and emphasizing the relational character of Marvel superheroes.

In conclusion, Anthony R. Mills' analysis stands as an interesting addition to the library of texts devoted to American comic books. However, it must be noted that the scope of the book is rather narrow. It is a specialized analysis which attempts to polemicize with the core assumptions of the American monomyth. Although the claims made by the author are valid and the point he raises seems to approach known issues from an alternative perspective, there is more space for a deeper analysis of presented titles. Theoretical chapters provide a well-rounded summary of argued concepts and their historical context, however, analytical chapters are handled in an uneven manner. The author devotes a substantial amount of focus to activities of Stan Lee and how he helped shape the ontological, epistemological, and ethical premise of the hero model Marvel readers and viewers know today, but handles Marvel theatrical productions with a rather selective interest. Some presented films are analysed extensively with the application of different critical tools, psychoanalysis as well as theological doctrines described in previous chapters, whereas others are tackled briefly with little to no relation to the prevailing premise of the book.

With that in mind it should be mentioned that the recent publication by Mills stands as a valid addition to the critical canon devoted to the American comic books, especially if one is interested in the evolution and treatment of the American monomyth formula. However, the specialization of the book and its narrow scope mean that the reader is required to compensate for the briefly supplied theoretical and historical information as well as selective analysis of certain film productions.