

The Survivor as Villain: X-men, Comic Culture and Auschwitz Fantasies

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“Oh, and the opening scene with Magneto? Sweet.” This is how one chat room participant, alias “Brox,” expressed his positive assessment of X-Men on the (now defunct) Moviefan online website Bryan Singer’s film, based on the legendary Stan Lee and Jack Kirby comic, became the summer of 2000 box office hit in the United States, opening on 3,025 screens and raking in \$57.5 million for the opening weekend. In chat rooms with participants from all over the world, there was disagreement on the details but agreement on the basics: “I loved the movie. I am really obsessed with X-Men. My parents think I’m crazy” (so says “Toad is a Hottie”).

At any given time in these cyberspace fora, there are myriads of experts and aficionados, praising and criticizing the film’s special effects, its actors and Singer’s expertise in transforming the long running Marvel comic series into a popular movie. The series, which began in 1963, is one of the most successful comics ever published and on-going in various permutations, from “Uncanny X-Men” to “Mutant X”. The series brings together old fans from the 1960s and contemporary teenagers, for an adolescent adventure. For that indeed is the subject of both the film and the comic.

But that’s not all this film is about. “Sweet” was the comment quoted above. Others put it in less unintentionally ironic words. Many comments agree that the “opening scene is very powerful.” This scene takes place in Auschwitz and the film’s plot recalls the memory of the Holocaust more than once. The audience take that as a given. Nothing to comment on.

It was little surprise that Auschwitz would impact on popular culture in film, comics and science fiction. Comic art has been a focus of American popular culture ever since the beginning of the 20th century and at the same time a vehicle of underground expressions. As early as the 1930s, comic series filled with American dreams and fantasies of empowerment became a playground for a Jewish immigrant culture. In 1932, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster gave birth to the prototype of such images: Superman. The writer Leil Leibowitz insists

that the “familiar narrative: sons of immigrants, who witness the destruction and helplessness of their European brethren, create omnipotent heroes as an imaginary response to real world evils”. This not only evolved in the 30s and 40s but influenced American culture for long afterwards. Only in recent years, has the Jewish input into American comic culture become a fashionable subject of interest with Michael Chabon’s novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier* (2000) and Clay to the recent exhibition *Masters of American Comics* (2006), which toured from Milwaukee to the Jewish Museum in New York.

The heroes of the comics represent universal and juvenile myths of the powerless turned into the powerful, the ordinary turned into the excellent and the reality of a human-made catastrophe. The Holocaust entered the horizon of this universe only on rare and exceptional occasions – at least until Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* opened a new discourse, using comic art and its fragmented narrative structure for a highly self reflective exploration of the impact that the Shoah had on post-war generations, survivors and their children.

That’s not the case with film. It was there right away when the dimensions of Auschwitz began to be explored by the arts and translated into images and narratives.

While comic culture never lost a certain anarchic quality and an air of childish spontaneity and openness, the film industry produced popular myths and fairy tales, which had to integrate diverse audiences on a large scale. And given the production value and political significance of film, it had to strive for both mass entertainment and serious art status.

But it’s worth examining those media where the “serious” and the “popular” meet and mingle, in the world of comics, as well as in television series and adventure fantasies.

Studies on film and the Holocaust widely follow the peaks of “high culture”, while those discussing the effect of the Holocaust on the American public agenda mostly remain on the plains of political discourse. The first is true for such pathbreaking studies like Ilan Avisar’s *Screening the Holocaust* (1988), Judith Doneson’s *The Holocaust in American Film* (2002) or Annette Insdorf’s *Indelible Shadows* (1989). These particular films basically agree in stating their criticism of fiction and genre film’s attempts toward a horizon of “authenticity”, and a “claim of truthfulness” associated with docudramas and documentaries – such as Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* or Alain Resnais’ *Night and Fog*, films with artistic merits but limited impact on the broad public.

Peter Novick’s book about *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999) concentrates on the watershed event of the Six-Day War in the Middle East and its impact on American Jewry, as a turning point of identity politics and popular images

of the Holocaust. And he does so without any reference to the variety of artistic and popular expressions of Holocaust fantasies, which have spread through the US since 1960. Novick only refers to the impact of the Eichmann trial and the debate about Hannah Arendt and Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy*. Alan Mintz in his *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (2001) at least adds the reception of Judgement at Nuremberg and Sidney Lumet's film *The Pawnbroker* to this picture, but again without reference to other more popular films, novels, comics or teleplays.

However, as Jeffrey Shandler already indicated in his study on American television *While America Watches* (1999), popular images of the Holocaust are informed particularly by so called "trivial" narratives, performed and presented in television dramas and episodes of all kind. These range from melodrama to sitcom, from family series to science fiction, as the numerous "guest appearances" in episodic programs like *Star Trek* (first in 1968, but then quite regularly in the 90s) demonstrate.

This essay tries to explore a perspective on the Holocaust and popular film, which takes seriously into account that fictional film, above all, is a contemporary and maybe the most important contemporary medium of story telling. Popular film projects a dream-like world of wish fulfilment into narratives that are both realistic and magic fairy tales.

So the starting point for this analysis is the assumption, that to become cinematic narratives, holocaust narratives have to follow generic traditions as much as they have to appeal to the desires of the audience.

X-Men and the Adventure of Good and Evil

Just as X-Men, the film, communicates to both veterans of comic culture and the kids in the global village, it also combines elements from many different genres, from science-fiction to action-adventure and from horror to teen-pic. Its plot seems to be a quite simple variation on the basic plot of all adventure genres. Two protagonists and with them two groups of people, the good and the bad, are confronting each other, and their fight determines the fate of the world. As Thomas Sobchack (1988, 9) put it: "based on the structure of the romance of medieval literature: a protagonist either has or develops great and special skills and overcomes insurmountable obstacles in extraordinary situations to successfully achieve some desired goal, usually the restitution of order to the world invoked by the narrative. The protagonists confront the human, natural, or supernatural powers that have improperly assumed control over the world and eventually defeat them."

X-Men confronts us with a new generation of the human species, products of evolution, mutants with extraordinary physical, telepathic or telekinetic abilities. Or to be more precise: X-Men confronts these mutants with us, the society, the world of the “normal” people, the majority, with its prejudices and its bigotry. Persecuted by the hatred of politicians, pushed into secrecy by outsiders, the mutants react differently to their role as pariahs. Charles Xavier, called Professor X, a wise old man in a wheelchair, played by Patrick Stewart, counts on peaceful integration into society. Behind the façade of a boarding school for gifted students, he trains mutants to control their abilities and to use them for the benefit of society. By contrast, his gloomy looking antagonist, “Magneto”, played by Ian Mc Kellen, declares war against humanity instead. He wants to stand up against the persecution of mutants by society and is willing to go quite far to do so. Thus we see, in slightly abridged fashion, the antagonism between good and evil.

Still, we can follow the pattern Sobchack finds in all popular film genres other than comedy, from western to horror, science fiction to swashbuckler, survival to jungle epic: “In these films, mankind is depicted as living in a world fraught with perils of all kinds, but through the exemplary effort, cooperation, and bravery of individuals or groups, the social order, without which man would perish, is maintained against all threats to its stability.” (Sobchack 1988, 9-10)

Sobchack forgets but one thing, which is evident already for the classic western: heroes and villains are not only antagonists but they have something fundamental in common. They are both different from those inside of society, or to be more precise, they are outside the community, which is built around church, school and farm. Both are outsiders, outcasts, lone riders, even if they assemble in teams of specialists or use their charisma to lead a gang. Something is wrong with them and their gifts; their magic skills (and nothing else is meant by their way of using guns) not only scare their enemies but also themselves. They are “others,” feared and admired, but not socially integrated, acting on the border between civilization and savagery, between the light and darkness of the urban jungle, between the known and unknown zones of the universe, the trustworthy and menacing spheres of science. Crossing borders all the time, back and forth, at the end of a movie they often have to decide: to remain faithful to themselves and thus to vanish back into the realm they came from (the prairie, the road, the jungle, outer space), or to become socialized, to marry, to give up being a hero. And since so many films are sequels, parts of a never-ending story, members of a series just like the comics, this decision can be postponed almost endlessly. When we see James Bond in the closure of one

of his adventures, with a girl in a boat, alone on the sea, we know that this is not going to be a family.

So, what makes the hero decide to be good and the villain evil? Fairytales, medieval romances and Hollywood films offer mostly redundant, circular answers. The hero commits himself to the good side – that is to the community, church, and family, to his fatherland or to humanity, to the farmer and against the criminal rancher, to an ethically limited science and against the irresponsible overreacher – because he is good at heart. And the villain makes the opposite choice because he is bad. The vocabulary, the code of good and evil is mostly easy to understand; we recognize the antagonists by their gestures, by the way they respond to children and animals.

Still, they share a relationship to reality that is ruled by its being perceived as a game. Both good and evil live in a world within the world, one which is still not adapted to being grown up, not controlled by routine and not tamed by alienation. They live in a world still experienced as an experiment, where curiosity is stronger than fear. Everything can be reversed – nothing is definite. All objects, and sometimes even human beings, can be turned upside down, taken apart, disassembled and reassembled. They are part of a magic reality of wish fulfilment.

Nonetheless, again and again, there are moments like flashlights, where we realize that there are two ways to play this game: One is connected with a love of life and of the game itself, while another is related to greed and disrespect for life. The line between these two principles of gamesmanship is narrow. The code of moral antagonism, although it works quite well, is nevertheless questioned all the time.

The confrontation between good and evil always means an intimacy too. We touch the evil, and something in it attracts us, convinces us. We trust in the commitment of the hero, the decisive moment when, provoked by some crisis, he steps out of his role as the cynical lone wolf and commits himself to the fate of the community, the weak and humble, and the civilized people who can't fight on their own. But we can never be "sure" about this; we are always trapped in suspense, waiting for the effect of the plot.

X-Men is not the first and certainly will not be the last film to play on this suspense, to explore the antagonism between good and evil as a drama of commitment and initiation. But it confronts us with a disturbing variation.

Back to the first scene of the film: Just before the curtain opens on the plot, we learn (from an off-camera voiceover), that evolution is making a jump forward in our times. The following events are thus presented as some kind of a founding myth, an act of initiation. The location where we witness the initial results of this acceleration of human evolution, the place on earth where they

could even be evoked – the film's narrative is not explicit here either way – is introduced to us by an insert: “Poland 1944”.

Bryan Singer has carefully studied Schindler's List and other fiction films on the Holocaust and he is familiar with the cinematic iconography of concentration and extermination camps. What we see – presented in greyish-brown colors, similar to old black and white movies – is shuffling feet in the mud. It's raining. A column of people, of all ages, is led along a fence and a gloomy old barracks, made of bricks. SS-guards keep watch. The greyish-brown scene is punctured only by the yellow stars. The column is moving toward a gate, families are clinging together but are separated violently. A boy is taken from his parents and kicked aside. And then something happens. His eyes are bursting with energy, his gaze seizes power over the scene, a disturbing power. He tries to follow his parents but is caught by the guards. His glare is becoming more and more intense. The guards almost fail to hold him. The boy's gaze grabs hold of the gate, which was closed after his parents. And while more and more guards come to stop him, the iron gate starts to tremble, and finally to contort. He is knocked to the ground with the butt of a rifle, which breaks the magnetic field of power that the audience felt almost physically. The column with his parents in it disappears into one of the buildings, a building with a huge chimney. The camera pans up to heaven, into a white screen.

We do not yet know that this very same boy will shortly reappear, in the “near future” where the plot unfolds, as the antagonist of our heroes. So the story begins with the prehistory of the villain; this is almost as unconventional as the prehistory itself. Yet nothing about this prehistory is so unconventional that the audience would be confused by all this. Bryan Singer could rely on enough audience familiarity with the Holocaust as a narrative icon, that it could easily and understandably motivate the characters and their actions, that it could inform the plot visually and morally in a transparent and convincing way.

Superheroes with Super Problems

It was not only the film's director, Bryan Singer, the scriptwriter, David Hayter, and the producers, 20th Century Fox, that counted on the reliability of “Auschwitz” as a standard of cultural knowledge. Already in 1963, when Marvel Comics launched the X-Men, popular media and television in particular, had started to draw attention to the history of the camps again. Around that time, the X-Men series presented its dark villain “Magneto” (alias Eric Magnus Lehnsherr), as an ambivalent antagonist. Magneto was part of a redefinition of the previously quite plain heroes in the Marvel comics universe, romantic

heroes without dramatic inner contradictions, allowing for more differentiated plots to be developed and more tension.

And during the course of time, while the comic series evolved around a growing set of heroes and into different permutations, jumping back and forth in time, this character developed his own history, a history related to his experience in the dark universe of Auschwitz. Firmly established as a Jewish character, Magneto only began to feature more often at the end of the seventies, following the rise of the Holocaust as a master paradigm after the screening of *Holocaust*. The staging of a Holocaust survivor as somehow threatening, even as a scary and diabolic villain, was not meant to be an antisemitic provocation at all, but rather a reflection of the current discourse of trauma and identity.

Lawrence Baron, in his study on *X-Men as J Men* (2003) one of the rare studies on this subject, missed this crucial point, when he located the introduction of Magneto's "Jewish story" into the comics narrative as being part of its original creation in 1963 by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. Kirby and Lee indeed had been followed by many generations of writers and artists involved in the series, working under their supervision.

Jack Kirby was born as Jacob Kurtzberg in 1917, to a family of Austrian Jews in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His first successful hero was Captain America who started his life fighting Hitler and the Nazis in March 1941, while Stan Lee, born as Stanley Lieber to Jewish-Rumanian immigrants in New York in 1923 had just joined the team at Marvel's forerunner *Timely Comics* and became the writer of the dialogues – before both joined the army.

Both met again in the late 1950s at Marvel and their story became the role model for Michael Chabon's novel. When Stan Lee had turned to Marvel after the war, he already described their comics strategy of 1941 as a "policy of telling the readers the truth about the Nazi menace" (Lee 1947, quoted in Baron 2003, 46). What had been an integral part of the public discourse in the US about whether or not to enter the war in Europe in 1941, seemed politically outmoded in the 1950s. And when in the 1960s American television and cinema started to rediscover the Holocaust as a subject, scrutinizing America's claim to represent universalistic values, comic culture instead turned to another mode of self-reflection, combining realism with "fantasy": it was time for "superheroes with super-problems," that is with problems like our own.

Unlike Superman or Batman, beginning with Marvel's Spiderman series, a hero appeared who was familiar with the everyday problems of an American teenager. Given the background of increasing ethnic conflict in American society, increasing tension and activism surrounding the civil rights movement, and an increasingly rebellious youth culture, in the context of a fragmented

and delegitimized American post-war social consensus, the X-Men – a group of mutants led by the gifted telepath Professor X, who use their magic skills and powers to defend the world against its adversaries, most prominently against evil-minded mutants – represented a completely new type of comic hero.

“The X-Men represented a crucial twist on the superhero concept. These young people were mutants, treated with fear and hatred by mainstream society just because they were different. [...] The X-Men were surrogates for blacks, gays, alienated teens – any group who felt the sting of stereotyping and social intolerance. While Superman and the Fantastic Four battled galactic overlords, the X-Men were busy fighting simply for their right to be, and kicking major bigot ass when necessary” (2002). This is true despite that the first set of characters in the comic were white American. It was only in 1975 that other “ethnic” groups entered the scene, something which a science-fiction series like *Star Trek* managed to do already in 1966 – and Stan Lee at least had claimed in a “soapbox” column of 1965: “We’d like to go on record about one vital issue – we believe that man has a divine destiny, and an awesome responsibility – the responsibility of treating all who share this wondrous world of ours with tolerance and respect – judging each fellow human on his own merit, regardless of race, creed and colour” (Baron 2003, 48).

The X-Men comic developed heroes who were weak and vulnerable because they saw their power, their skills and their difference from others as a problem, as a target of aggression and expulsion. The United States, as a whole, had come to realize that its national morality could be scrutinized and questioned in light of its internal contradictions – a realization that foreshadowed the much more obvious struggles over the moral status of the war in Vietnam.

The X-men presented heroes who felt vulnerable and threatened by their own new abilities, since mutation threatens one’s own self, creates an ambiguous feeling toward one’s own body, which goes through a period of evolution, change and insecurity. The heroes in the X-Men did not combat enemies from outer space, invading aliens who stood in for the Reds from the East, but instead had to fight against the prejudices of their own society – and against themselves and their own anxieties.

Like the Western movies of the 60s, the X-Men represented heroes who no longer appeared as the lone riders of the classic western formula, but as teams of specialists, with differentiated qualifications, as “professionals.” Will Wright (1975) has interpreted this evolution of the great American myth – from lone rider to team of professionals – as a reaction to changing social and economic realities, as a way to reintegrate individualism and professional improvisation, as something required in a corporate society and economy. He pointed to the

fact that this metamorphosis of the western adventure plot went through different stages of more and more complex oppositions of good and bad. Those connected to the theme of vengeance, driving the hero into an almost tragic realm of inevitable guilt, and those connected to an alienation from society, a society which gives into corruption and cowardice.

What Wright failed to recognize is that this professional ethos of a gifted elite of skilled individuals, who remain far from any commitment to social values, already contains within itself its counterpart, the potential for the outsider and border-crosser to serve as a political and communal figure of rebellion. Last but not least, the X-Men, over the course of time, presented a broad spectrum of characters, which included male and female heroes, different ethnicities and “races” – a multiethnic team. When Marvel comics decided to split the comic into a variety of series, even the most faithful aficionados sometimes lost view of the myriads of different characters, stories and time levels.

The authors of X-Men decided to create the central villain with a background as a Holocaust survivor. The motivation behind this was due to the orientation of the whole plot: to blur the distinction between good and evil, to relate the figures differently to each other than was common in the universe of comics. Some of the characters move from one side to the other, as Wolverine does, who plays an important role in Singer’s film. Likewise Magneto, who is good friends with Xavier for some time, after having met him for the first time in Israel, where Xavier falls in love with an Israeli Mossad agent, while Magneto works in a mental hospital with Holocaust survivors.

On the fan websites, short biographies provide information on the different characters, and their metamorphoses throughout the series. One reads for instance: “Eventually Magnus went to Israel, where he worked as a volunteer orderly at a psychiatric hospital and where he first met and became friends with Charles Xavier (see Professor X). Magnus and Xavier frequently debated the subject of mutants’ coexistence with the rest of humanity”. Magneto, who lost his whole family in the Holocaust, guides a number of different teams and brotherhoods throughout his career: as the leader of the “Brotherhood of Evil Mutants,” as well as of the X-Men themselves, as the “teacher of the New Mutants,” the “Lords Cardinal of the Hellfire Club” and the “leader of the Acolytes.” A prequel published after the start of the film not only tells about Magneto and Xavier’s chance meeting in a pub in Israel, almost destroyed by a bomb attack, but also about Magneto’s vengeance against one of the SS-men and murderer of his family in Auschwitz.

Holocaust-Twilight in the 60s

The fact that X-Men dragged Auschwitz into the universe of fantasy revived in popular culture a phenomenon well known to an American audience since the time when the X-Men were put on the track. Its central figure, the menacing Holocaust survivor, reflects quite a number of popular and art house productions from the early 60s, which had a transformative impact on the morally naïve humanism apparent in the few prior examples of representations of Holocaust victims. On those few occasions where the Holocaust played any role in American film or TV in the 50s, it was as a contrast to the American self-image as a melting pot, to highlight the success of integration, religious tolerance and ecumenicity, the dream of progress, where everyone gets their chance. The Holocaust appeared as a “liberal” subject of interest within the constraints of the “anti-totalitarian” front in the symbolic battles of the cold war.

But when the 50s came to an end, fissures and ruptures emerged in the repressive consensus - established under the auspices of McCarthy and the HUAC - which could not be suppressed by the increasing tensions in the world (Cuba, Vietnam etc.). The US became a superpower with super-problems and both the US's role as a victorious power in the Second World War, as well as the moral consequences of this war, again became subjects for scrutiny, first on TV and then on the big screen. In 1959, the Nuremberg trials were examined anew with *Playhouse go* on CBS aired Abby Mann's teleplay *Judgment at Nuremberg*. Maximilian Schell played the widely contradictory role of the defender of Nazi judges in the trial. Two years later Stanley Kramer's movie of the same name premiered in Berlin, with an “all-star cast” including Schell again as the defender Rolfe, Spencer Tracy, Burt Lancaster, Judy Garland, Montgomery Clift and Marlene Dietrich. Berlin was divided by the wall. So the premiere, amidst the climax of the Cold War, was loaded with political implications. Kramer ends his film with an ambitious statement. He contrasts the pathos of law and justice established in the trial (and sustained by one of the defendant's completely fictitious confession) with the corrupting political dementi of the trials. In 1948, the Germans were already being viewed as necessary allies in the percolating Cold War. As we all know, defence attorney Rolfe's “prediction” that all of the defendants would be released from prison within ten years turned out to be prescient. But as Judge Haywood (Spencer Tracy) concludes, not everything that is a fact is therefore “right.”

What made the critical re-examination of the immediate post-war trials even more significant, was the fact that it took place against the backdrop of a whole wave of new trials starting in Germany in 1958. These trials were getting

worldwide attention through the media coverage of Eichmann's abduction from Argentina and the trial against him in Jerusalem. This made the Holocaust a crime to be considered separately in its own right, and thus the subject of a distinct courtroom narrative for the first time. The politics of the trial, and the plot structure of its performance as a drama, made the Holocaust a tale of spiritual survival from evil, and the transformation of a victimized people into a sovereign nation, a dark adventure which the state of Israel should draw its legitimacy from as the heir to the vanished Jewish Diaspora, taking justice in its own hands. And it put even the word Holocaust on the agenda. In contrast to Nuremberg, it was the murder of European Jews that informed the prosecution, and the testimonies of the survivors, which formed the major part of the trial performance. This was also the case at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial (in preparation since 1959, in session from 1963 to 1965). The survivors became witnesses, exposing their experiences to the public and becoming symbols of ambivalence, characters who transmit their trauma into the present. They became figurations of unpredictability, even social misfits, connected with the perpetrators invisibly, and possibly more effective than with their social reality of today. Fantasies spread, which portrayed the survivors as possible avengers.

This was already – and even more explicitly – evident in the public discourse about the preparation of the Eichmann trial, and particularly his abduction from Argentina, which in the US was critically reviewed, as Peter Novick vividly describes in *The Holocaust in American Life*. The *Wall Street Journal* saw an “atmosphere of Old-Testament retribution” in Israel's actions.

On December 14, 1961 *Judgment at Nuremberg* premiered in Berlin – the same day that Adolf Eichmann was sentenced in Jerusalem – and was accompanied by speeches by Mayor Willy Brandt and General Lucius Clay. The courtroom became the setting of a number of films about the Holocaust and its impact on post-war societies, even before the concept of “Holocaust” itself was really established. American TV series had been the first to translate the rise of the survivors in the public sphere into fictional narratives, as Jeffrey Shandler shows in his book about American television and the Holocaust. In the episode *The Avenger* from the series *The Defenders* (CBS 1961-1965), produced by Herbert Brodtkin and written by Reginald Rose in 1962, a survivor appeared as an avenger for the crimes against his family. Meyer Loeb kills the well-known scientist Gerhard Prinzler and stands trial – confronting the audience with a case in which the standard conventions of right or wrong, justice and injustice collapse. Loeb has identified Prinzler as the SS-doctor responsible for the murder of his wife and his son in a concentration camp. “The Avenger offers no easy division between hero and villain,” writes Shandler. “Loeb and Prinzler are both characterized as victims and as killers. [...] Moreover, the episode

does not conclude, according to the convention of courtroom drama, with an unambiguous resolution.” (Shandler 1999, 137)

The jury and the defenders have to deal with the complete and blank confession of the defendant, without any repentance – and with the (indeed not convincing) attempts of the American widow of the deceased Nazi doctor to present her husband as a man with good-willed intentions, trying to do the best for the prisoners under impossible circumstances. The episode ends without solving the dilemma of how to judge such an act, with the jury postponing its decision. The jury is hung with 6 votes to 6 votes – showing the seriousness of the trial, and the seriousness of the jury in charge of finding a sentence. “We need more time.” The plot centres not so much on the motives of the Jewish perpetrator of the crime, negotiated in this courtroom, but on the insistent attempt of his lawyers, Preston and son, to re-establish a sense of faith in the law and the values of society in their reluctant client.

The climax in the end is the first smile in the face of defendant Mayer Loeb, after a last exchange of arguments with his defenders: “The law depends ultimately on human beings. We use it.” And Preston senior answers: “That is its weakness, but also its strength. And it continues to improve.” In spite of all critical examination: the faith in the potential of justice must not be broken.

Already in 1961, in an episode of his highly popular horror science-fiction TV-series, *Twilight Zone* (CBS 1959-1965), entitled *Death's Head Revisited*, Rod Sterling had presented a phantasmagoric trial against an SS captain named Lutze, played by Oscar Beregi. Out of nostalgia, Lutze visits his former workplace at Dachau. There he meets the ghosts of his victims, and Alfred Becker, whom Lutze had killed personally, leads him into Compound Six, where the court awaits him. The sentence is to live in madness for the rest of his life. Nothing can express more clearly the gap between this film and the icon of the 50s, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), than the logic of Sterling's casting. Joseph Schildkraut plays the irreconcilable victim Becker, the same Schildkraut who played Anne Frank's father Otto, the sole survivor of the Frank family in George Stevens' melodrama (as he did already in 1955, when the play by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett premiered on Broadway). So in 1961 he was well known to the public as the transmitter of Anne Frank's message of reconciliation (“In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart”), a mourning man, refraining from all thoughts of revenge or even satisfaction.

The Holocaust dramas of the 60s are centred around survivors (or victims), who, unlike Anne Frank, do not believe in the goodness of man anymore, but are presented as some kind of strange misfits in the world of today, traumatized and opaque people, with a background of unmastered horrors. This is an

image far apart from the political correctness of the survivor as an institution of public discourse. While in popular film this “institution” today is hardly questioned, more complex fantasies about the survivor for the last ten or fifteen years were expressed particularly in popular genres of literature and those who play self-consciously with these genres, like in the hardboiled style of French “Roman Noir” or some Israeli mystery novels.

These survivors appear not only as victims, but as marked people, on whom the perpetrators had placed their stamp of evil. They could be deformed, even corrupted by the archetypal villains of history, and in this respect they could even resemble them, as a presence of evil in every day life today, disturbing like those perpetrators who made their way out of Europe. Some even lived among the Americans. This was recognized as early as 1955 in a comic strip by Al Feldstein and Bernard Krigstein - Master Race - published in *Impact* magazine (1955), which specialized in the horror genre. In the New York subway, a man named Reissmann meets with a familiar face in the crowd. Another man evokes Reissmann’s memories, images from the past, from National Socialism and the camps. More precisely: the block text asks if Reissmann really does remember (Frahm 1997, 314). It is not clear yet, who is victim and who is perpetrator, when the other man, who now recognizes Reissmann as well, starts to pursue him. Only when Reissmann becomes the victim of this chase, finally falling from the platform and under a train, his identity is exposed: he is the former commandant of Bergen-Belsen and the other man one of his victims. But both of them are running. As Ole Frahm (1997, 2006), a scholar of graphic literature puts it, both of them are pursued by their common past; for both heaven is full of corpses, as the images present it; for neither the past is over. Perpetrators and survivors thus appear as a threat to the social fabric of everyday life, as a continuation of the past in the American society.

This ambivalence toward the survivor, tempered by helpless empathy or fear, moral disturbance and ignorance, fantasies around the horrors of the camps and comparisons with the abyss amidst the reality of New York, was most radically expressed in Sidney Lumet’s film *The Pawnbroker* from 1964 (adopted from the novel by Edward Louis Wallant, 1961). Here the survivor, who runs a pawnshop in Harlem, meets with the “racial” and social conflicts of “today,” in a jungle of corruption, alienation, injustice and desolation. This New York is a world where even the clear perspective of power has vanished, where ethnic minorities are played one against the other, and where the liberal coalition of Blacks and Jews has become fragile. Harlem experiences revolts and sometimes outbursts of violence of an anti-Jewish character, when African-Americans direct their anger against their Jewish neighbours, whose grocery

stores and pawnshops are understood by some as a symbol of economic success at the expense of African-American poverty.

Harlem, as Lumet portrays it, is a world that reactivates memories of the camps. It is a world that Nazerman, a Jew, an intellectual and a onetime caring family father meets only with cold and tired indifference. His emotions were killed in the camps, like his children and his wife, who was raped before his eyes. But his indifference provides only a fragile protection against his memories. Nazerman learns that his pawnshop is nothing but an instrument, a façade for the illegal business of a black Mafioso, who is powerfully characterized visually as some kind of a negative transfer-picture of the SS-man who tortured Nazerman in the camps: a black man in a white suit, a profiteer of the “ghetto.” The flashbacks in the film associate this black Mafioso immediately with the SS-man who raped Nazerman’s wife and made him a mute, paralyzed “voyeur”, incapable of doing anything, just as he is now in Harlem, watching the life of the “ghetto” from his cell-like post in his pawnshop, untouched by the misery of those who come into his shop and leave their last possession with him for a dollar. Nazerman’s name already expresses blankly the disturbing consequence of this fiction, not without Christian connotations. The prototype of the victim as sacrifice – the man from Nazareth – and the prototype of the perpetrator (and taking into account this Christian backdrop of sacrifice) – the Nazi man – are merged into one figure. The plot of the film (and the book) construes not only an economic relationship between powerful exploiters as perpetrators and the socially irreconcilable survivor, but more than that: they are metaphorically presented in a kind of existential closeness. In the words of film scholar Ilan Avisar (1988, 125): “Because of his traumatic experiences at the hands of the Nazis, [Nazerman] almost understandably behaves like one of his former tormentors: his name suggests that he is a kind of Nazi-made man. But at the end of the film, he is redeemed and is thus qualified to be looked at as the man of Nazareth.”

What these very different films have in common is the confusion of moral categories in these survivor characters and their behaviour. They do not fit into the social fabric, not in the way society expects them to, and not according to the patterns of morality that a critical approach towards social injustice would appreciate. But still they cannot be measured or even tried according to these standards. These fictions did not have much to do with the actual reality of the life of those survivors who made their way into American society, starting families and businesses, seeking “normality” to escape from their memories. But they fulfilled a crucial function in a discourse on the passage from the repressive security of the 50s into the social, political and cultural conflicts of the 60s. The idea of the melting pot had become as questionable as the prom-

ises of the American way of life that claimed it could heal all the wounds of the refugees from Europe. "Give me your poor" is written on the Statue of Liberty, not far from Ellis Island, where the immigrants underwent the ambivalent, promising and disgraceful rituals that characterized their arrival in the Promised Land.

"There is no Land of Tolerance" – Adolescence, Authority and Ambivalence

The critical discourse about the promises of the Statue of Liberty: in Bryan Singer's movie *X-Men*, almost forty years after the start of the comic series, this topography provides the setting for the final showdown between the heroes and the villains, metaphorically and physically. But before we reach this point, Xavier's X-Men have to be introduced and their fight against Magneto's dark brotherhood of mutants has to get on track. The white dissolve, which ends the first sequence, leads from the crematorium at Auschwitz into the peaceful scenery of an American middleclass suburb, in the "near future." But this idyll too has its traumatic dimensions. Indeed, these are of a different character, arising immediately from the anxieties and fantasies of a young audience. Indeed, the way in how the film plays on the vague analogy of such a varied collective and an individual kind of trauma should be the subject of closer analysis.

Mary, a sixteen year-old girl who will later on call herself Rogue, is having her first experiences with a boy – while her mother is doing exercises on the piano. She plays terribly out of tune, repeating a nervous motif all the time, thus providing a disturbing element to the soundtrack. Rogue's first kiss turns into a nightmare. Her friend falls into a coma, shrinking up in a frightening way. Rogue herself, she learns later, is one of those mutants whose fate is at that moment the subject of a debate in the American Senate. Her ability to take away other people's life-energy, their thoughts and powers simply by touching them is called forth by the emotional stress she experiences during this flirtation. It makes her a pariah, an untouchable person in the most literal sense.

In the Senate we meet Charles Xavier and Magneto, confronting each other. Both came to listen to a hearing where Jane Grey, one of Xavier's X-Men, and the ultra-conservative Senator Robert Kelly, compete with their arguments. Kelly, explicitly resembling McCarthy, calls for the registration, observation and branding of mutants, in the hopes of eliminating them from society. TV news show his supporters with slogans like "mutant free America".

Professor X and Magneto meet in the lobby:

Professor X: "Don't give up on them [mankind], Eric."

Magneto: "What would you have me do, Charles? I've heard these arguments before."

Professor X: "It was a long time ago. Mankind has evolved since then."

Magneto: "Yes, into us. You're seeking round in here, Charles. Whatever you're looking for."

Professor X: "I'm looking for hope."

Magneto: "I will bring you hope, my old friend. I ask you just for one thing. Don't get in my way. We're the future, Charles, not them. They no longer matter."

Magneto no longer believes in the promises of tolerance and freedom, civil rights and multiethnic diversity. By showing his Auschwitz tattoo, his identity is clearly revealed and his perfected skill at controlling anything subject to magnetic power. His megalomaniac attitude is composed of the pathos of defence - his own kind's right to live - and the vision of overcoming mankind by the power of a superior species, self-protection and some kind of a racist utopia. Ian McKellen explains his interest in the role with reference to his own feelings of being perceived as a mutant: "I'm interested in this mutant world because in a way, I feel like I'm a mutant! Being a gay man, I often am thought to be too dangerous, unusual and abnormal to be allowed into society as a whole, judging by the laws that prevail in my country and indeed throughout the world. And it's not just gay people who can identify with these characters, but other minorities as well".

Yet whatever Singer and the actors say about tolerance and minorities, the decision to present Rogue's story as the central narrative in the plot is directed toward the audience which is best prepared to identify with mutants: kids in their puberty and adolescence, the most important market for the film industry. X-Men deals with the scary experience of living with a transforming body that one cannot control, with the feeling of being something unique, and not understood by those who are normal. X-Men deals with the anxieties provoked by one's own aggressive emotions, those emotions one has yet to learn to control - those aggressive wishes one tries to conceal and which produce fear and guilt, when they sometimes suddenly become true.

X-Men tells stories about the urge to run away from all the well-prepared, fixed and unsuited, to look for adventures, to examine one's own skills and new powers, that shake one's own self. It also represents the longing for a community beyond the rules of society, one with a codex that acknowledges these fantasies of otherness and megalomaniac pride.

The book that was published on the occasion of the film's premiere in the summer of 2000 provides prehistories for all the leading characters among the X-Men. All of them, like Magneto, first experience their mutant abilities and features in certain moments of stress during their puberty or adolescence. Storm, the weather sorceress of the X-Men, reveals her power to manipulate the elements, to create storms, lightning and thunder, when a gang of kids in her village in Kenya violently maltreats and mocks her. Cyclops, who has to cover his eyes because his gaze cuts through anything like a powerful laser, experiences his power for the first time when a girl he adores pushes him away.

To be a mutant, in the cosmos of the X-Men, means to be confronted with the horrible consequences of one's own aggressive wishes coming true. The film draws into a disturbing closeness the individual insults suffered in puberty, which simultaneously break and inflame adolescent fantasies of all-mighty power, and the collective trauma of Auschwitz. Looking for appropriate metaphors for the worst that can happen to the human ego, the authors of the X-Men, right after the screening of Holocaust, finally ended in the univers concentrationnaire. The association of a jump in evolution and the crisis of puberty, catastrophe and initiation mythologize Auschwitz as a kind of foundational event, even when the plot of the film and the comic do not pretend that Auschwitz itself and its horrors produced these mutations. One might find it particularly disturbing that the analogy between being Jewish and being a mutant strongly links Jewishness with a genetic determinism. However, the mutants in this plot are just a cipher for being different or even simply for being an adolescent. So to insist on political correctness here would lead nowhere.

While the comics mainly rely on a weird tableau of fantastic figures, who in a series of explosive adventures fight out with each other their own inner conflicts, the film's narrative has to rely on verisimilitude, and on a general "psychology" of characters. And while the film's opening scene relates the rise of Magneto's mutant powers to the moments of crisis in puberty and adolescence (marked by contradicting desires and fear, aggressive wishes and sexual development, longing for independence and the fear of loss) the later antagonism between Magneto and Professor Xavier explores the same potential of inner conflict as a part of the adolescent search for authority in the world. Magneto and Xavier, the two so much different leaders and father figures, above all, represent two different kinds of closure to the drama of growing up: confidence or mistrust in the extreme.

So the young X-Men in these characters meet their own future. Rogue, the untouchable girl, escaped her world of normalcy, her suburb in Mississippi, and went alone into the Canadian wilderness, something she had already

dreamt of for a long time. There she meets Wolverine. Another fugitive, who earns his money as a fighter in a smoky pub where truck drivers, lumberjacks and desperados look for some adventure and the landlord offers a ring for all kinds of duels, and where the audience like to participate, betting on one side or the other. Wolverine is a mutant too. His body is able to recover from all types of wounds in an instant. As we learn later, this is a skill that became his traumatic fate. Unknown villains have abused him as a kind of guinea-pig, when they exchanged his skeleton for a new one made from “adamantium,” giving him razor sharp claws as a weapon that emerge from his fists in moments of emotional stress. Rogue succeeds in convincing the lone wolf Wolverine to take her with him, and the plot starts. Wolverine and Rogue are attacked by members of Magneto’s brotherhood. They are saved by the X-Men. Brought into the “Boarding school for gifted students,” the institution founded and led by Professor X to integrate young mutants peacefully into society, to assimilate their abilities and to teach them how to control these powers. This is a world quite similar to that of Harry Potter.

The audience is introduced into the world of the X-Men and their struggle for acceptance. Magneto’s attacks are getting more and more serious, and we finally realize, that they are not targeted at Wolverine but at Rogue. Magneto’s helpers, the roaring but not very clever Sabretooth, the diabolical Toad with his long dangerous tongue and the enigmatic blue lady Mystique, who is able to transform into any character, manage to kidnap her. The X-Men confront them at a train station, which both teams, in an inferno of special effects, lay to ruin. Xavier, with telepathic powers, gets Sabretooth under his control and forces him to take Magneto in a stranglehold. But now Xavier chooses not to go on.

Professor X: “What do you want them for?”

Magneto: “Can’t you read my mind? What now? Save the Girl? You’ll have to kill me, Charles. What would that accomplish? Let them pass this law and they’ll have you in chains and a number burned into your forehead.”

Professor X: “It won’t be that way.”

Magneto: “Then kill me and find out.”

Professor X hesitates.

Magneto: “Then release me. Fine. Still not willing to make sacrifices. That’s what makes you weak.”

Charles Xavier, the “pacifist“, lets Magneto leave with Rogue.

In the end Magneto and Rogue, the trauma of mankind and the anxieties of puberty are merged energetically. Magneto needs Rogue for the realization of his plan. Ellis Island is the location of a worldwide UN conference, bringing

together the leaders of the world. We listen to a TV commentator explain the symbolic meaning of this site. Flags flutter in the winds, an Israeli flag prominently visible among them. The subject of the conference is the mutant question, which the powers of the world are going to decide.

Magneto's plan seems convincing. With a magnetic field of energy he wants to transform the leaders of the world's nations into mutants themselves. He has already "proved" that his plan works well with the most appropriate guinea pig, he could find: Senator Robert Kelly. What Magneto does not know is that his experiment failed. Kelly liquefies to death in the high-tech infirmary of Xavier's school. His mutated cells dissolve and his body ends in a watery mess. For his field of energy, Magneto needs Rogue's capacity to absorb the power of another person, his own magnetic power. He chooses the Statue of Liberty as the site for his devilish machine. A symbolic choice indeed. In the night of the nights, the captured girl in chains on the floor of the patrol-boat beneath him, Magneto looks at the Statue of Liberty:

Magneto (sarcastically): "Magnificent."

Rogue (bitter): "I've seen it."

Magneto: "I first saw her in 1949. America was going to be the Land of Tolerance, of peace."

Rogue looks at the dead policeman, lying right next to her.

Rogue: "Are you going to kill me?"

Magneto (sad): "Yes."

Rogue: "Why?"

Magneto: "Because there is no Land of Tolerance, there is no peace. Not here, not anywhere else. Women and children, whole families destroyed, simply because they were born different from those in power. The world's powerful will be just like us, they will return home as brothers, as mutants. Our cause will be theirs. Your sacrifice means our survival."

The X-Men succeed, of course, in saving Rogue at the very last second, overwhelming Magneto's brotherhood and switching off the machine, which already created a field of energy touching the shore of Ellis Island. Wolverine leaves the X-Men to find his own origin, the source of his trauma, which is covered quite literally, if superficially, by his self-healing wounds, though not in his mind. Mystique has miraculously survived the battle on the Statue of Liberty and reappears as Senator Kelly on the political scene. So the audience is well prepared for the sequel, waiting for a lot of other stories and characters from the comics to be explored.

We meet Magneto and Xavier, the two strategists, in the last scene of the film, playing chess with each other. For a while the world seems to be safe

from Magneto and the traumatic consequences of his experience. Magneto is held in a cell of glass, hovering in a huge concrete tower, deprived of his magnetic powers. But Magneto has not given up, despite the hopes of his “old friend” Xavier, who still wants to reconcile Magneto and his trauma with society, the universe of human beings. In the sequels following the film, Magneto’s Auschwitz history plays only a subtle role, re-established only by casual sights of his tattoo and the very simple fact, that he remains a representation of ambivalence, allowing him and his fellows to join the good side at least temporarily in *X2: X-Men United*, facing the mortal threat of possible genocide again, persecuted by the revenge seeking General Stryker who drives a weak and unsympathetic American president into war.

Still, we become more familiar during these films with Magneto, the villain, than with the virtuous Xavier and all his goodness, his character of a Christian saint (saviour). Different from Mephistopheles, the seducer of evil, Magneto not only has logic on his side, but also the image of a suffering, innocent child. *X-Men* is a film about growing up, not about the Holocaust, and not even about mutants, genetic technologies or racism. It is a film about growing up in a world with ruined moral standards, not beyond good and evil, but after any certainty about what these words really mean. Regarding that, *X-Men* indeed is a film conceived after “Poland 1944”.

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