

**3<sup>rd</sup> HELLENIC OBSERVATORY SYMPOSIUM**  
**LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS**

**“Super hero comics fandom and psychosocial identity construction in late modernity”**

Dr Patricia Gerakopoulou, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences,  
Athens

*Abstract* - This paper deals with the Psycho – Social Identity construction as an evolutionary process in the socio - cultural context of post - modernity. Readership choices are thought to be a psycho - social investment on the way to the adulthood and to identity construction and also a significant code which can reveal not only the meaning of the personal development, but also the reader’s perception of the Zeitgeist. The research gleanings hold up a model about the appearance of specific psycho - social “growing up” stages according to the readers’ internal and external reality. These phases and phenomena are common both for readers and for their favorite heroes: there aren’t only the individuals who are on the way to adulthood here; we find the same patterns in society’s “growing up” procedure through its projection in the media products. In this context it appears that individuals, societies and cultural capital seem to follow the same specific steps at least in terms of structure and proportion. The qualitative methodological approach follows the multi - perspective deal of the subject, practicing the “montage” technique of the “Bricoleur”: a performance of a various number of diverse tasks, ranging from the Life Story Approach to the semi – structured interviewing and from the in depth content analysis and projection techniques to the interpretive reading.

*Key words* – Fandom, popular culture audiences, psycho - social identity, imaginary, post – modernity, moral development.

**THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS**

Philosophers of our time (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2002; Balandier, 1994) talk about the end of history pointing out that we are trying to understand and to find a meaning to reality through concentration in the fragments of everyday life; generally through what used to be known during the Hellenistic Times as the “minima” (Cioran, 1988). Today the story telling of mass media is the profound narrator of our history: history of the individual, of its society, of its time and of its culture. With their persistent cataclysmic presence in comics, cinema, advertisement, television, in objects we like, in every spontaneous or more systematic choice we make, media narratives introduce a MacLuhanic extension of our selves projecting out there, available for consumption, what is inside, and at the same time expressing our comment for what is happening around us.

Here we study the narrations of super hero comics. And we try to understand their meaning through the point of view of their consumer, their systematic reader; the comics fan who is not a pathetic hypnotized figure of consumption, or a victim of subculture, as more than 30 years of study about comics and their audience is trying desperately to prove (Wertham, 1954), but an individual who keeps the power of its

personal choice. We point out the importance of the readership choice and we are trying to show what this choice means psychosocially for the person who makes it. In this context we put under theoretical and methodological discussion 3 questions:

- Which are the basic terms that analyze and describe the reading condition where the reader appears to be “imaginarily convinced” by the hero and the story he/she reads?
- What is the description of the heroes and the stories that appear to convince imaginarily the reader in every stage of his psychosocial development.
- What these specific readership choices tell us about the way that the individual face his inner and external reality?

We will show how Greek super hero comics fans choose specific types of super – heroes in every stage of their psycho- social development. Lucacs (1960) and Eco (1994) have suggested that when we talk about a “typical hero” we describe a person who can convince his reader for its social, political, psychological or historical truth. In our study we understand that a typical hero must be “imaginarily convincing” for his reader, in other words must be capable to express what the reader finds true referring to his internal and external reality.

To understand this idea we first need to discuss theoretically a few basic terms.

#### The fandom

- Generally it is defined as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text (Sandvoss, 2005) and it is associated with a particular form of emotional intensity or “affect” to the reader (Grossberg, 1992).
- Psychoanalytic approaches to fandom (Creed, 1993; Stacey, 1994; Elliott, 1999; Hoxter, 2000) emphasize the intense emotional bond between fans and their objects of fandom through processes such as projection and introjection (Freud, 1905/1977; 1927/1982; 1923/1984) or the intermediate function of the object of fandom located between the spheres of self and object world as transitional object (Klein, 1946/2000; Winnicott, 1951/2000).
- Psycho- social approaches to fandom (Sandvoss, 2005) argued that the relationship between fans and their object of fandom is based on fans self – reflecting reading and hence narcissistic pleasures, as fans are fascinated by extensions of themselves (McLuhan, 1964), which they do not recognize as such.

#### The imaginary

- Lacans’ “imaginary” (“imaginaire”) (1949) as basic part of inner reality: Refers to the “mirror stage” to describe individual’s faith to be captured for ever in the image of an “identical other” (his image on the mirror). The personal meaning we recognize in every object defines the “imaginary”

area. We suggest that the meaning that every comics fan finds in every super- hero that recognizes as “convincing” reveals his imaginary.

- Kastoriades’ theory (1978) about the “imaginary construction of the social” suggests that imaginary social meanings are embedded in everyday life’s time and place defining the area between Ideology and Culture. We introduce that the super hero comics content, along with the personal meaning that their reader finds in them is captured there.

### The idea of the development of self in stages

Developmental psychosocial changes in stages from childhood to adolescence and then to maturity support the diversity of the readership choices. We refer among others to:

- Eriksons’ theory for “the eight ages of the individual” (1990).
- Kolberg’s work about the stages of the moral development (1963, 1969).

### Identity and post – modernity

Giddens (1990) and Bauman (2002) describe a new type of identity which is defined as constructed by the fragments of modern life. We find this kind of identity projected at the readership choices of the comics fans at their late stage of their history as comics readers.

Putting this schema in practice we approached our subject in a purely ethnographic qualitative context, based on the life story telling and the interpretative content analysis of 40 semi- structured interviews with Greek systematic super hero comics fans (Brooker, 2002). All men as described by the relevant theory (Barker & Brooks, 1998), based in Athens and Piraeus and aged 18-36 years old.

## A. ANALYSIS OF THE “IMAGINARY CONVICTION”

Readers develop an important bond with their object of fandom when they feel “imaginarily convinced” by it. This happens when the super hero they favor projects their empirical truth about their selves and the world they live in. This condition of “imaginary conviction” is analyzed with 3 specific terms:

1. The “imaginary credibility”: Refers to specific claims for credibility that the reader has in connection to what every time thinks of being the “truth” in his internal and external reality (definition about the “human” in super hero comics, representation of the social, ideas about the moral and ideology e.t.c.)
2. The “empathetic enchantment”: Describes the sense of enchantment that the reader feels physically the moment that he reads something that is imaginarily convincing. It often appears in reference to 1) the sentimental adventures of the favorite hero, 2) the super – hero powers, 3) the “bad” character and the violence in the stories.
3. The “imaginary escape”: It is what readers describe as “escape from reality” and it is at the same time an elusion of the inner reality and an appeal to the time of the narcissistic childhood almightiness.

These 3 basic terms of “imaginary conviction” appear to be transformed in time and from stage to stage in reference to the specific developmental stages of identity construction and also in connection to how the individual responds to the changes of external reality (see Postmodernity).

## B. THREE STAGES IN THE COMICS FANS READERSHIP STORY

Our research suggests that what comics fans favor to read at every significant point in their history as super hero comics readers reflects deferent psychological, cognitive and psychosocial dimensions of their identity development. In this context we can organize their readership choices in 3 specific stages in reference to their age, preferences and imaginary motivations.

1. 1<sup>st</sup> Stage (8-13 years old): classic super – heros (Spiderman)

Emphasis to the body super hero powers and to the “human” dimension of the character, idealization, absolute “good – bad”

2. 2<sup>nd</sup> Stage (13- 17 years old): super – hero groups (X-MEN)

Emphasis to the impressive super – hero powers working in synergy, to the social life of super heroes as members of their group, to “teen boyish” personality characteristics as independence, masculinity, capriciousness

3. 3<sup>rd</sup> Stage (17- 36): postmodern anti – heros (Spawn, Sandman, Sin Sity, Watchmen)

Emphasis to mental super – human powers, relativity in terms of ideas, morals, ethics, absorption, violence, social realism

If we have a good look at these tree stages we can notice a series of basic transitions that describe the individuals’ change through time.

- From the absolute to the relative in terms of values, moral, ideology in narrations
- From emphasis to physical super – hero powers to emphasis to mental super – hero powers
- From “human realism” to “social realism”
- From focus to the super – hero to focus to its creators
- From a “modern” type of reference to a “postmodern” one

## CONCLUSION

The study of the readership choices can reveal the way that comics fans deal with their inner and external reality in specific stages. The psychosocial study of a mass

medium that appear to be “imaginarily convincing” can reveal the way we are growing up as psycho – social individuals in a postmodern context. In this context we can understand how the personal and the social, the individual and its culture follow specific parallel steps. We are all growing up together, simultaneously with our society and our ideology. Our identity appears to be adapted to the environment. Even (according to the concept of this “imaginarily convincing” symposium) the Greek identity to a Greek way of dealing with a Greek description of late modernity.

## References

- Balandier, G. (1994) *Le Dédale: pour en finir avec XXe siècle*, Paris : Fayard.
- Barker, M & Brooks, K. (1998) *Knowing audiences: Judge Dredd: its friends, fans and foes*, Luton: Luton University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2002) *Η μετανεωτερικότητα και τα δεινά της*, Αθήνα: Ψυχογιός.
- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society*, London: Sage.
- Brooker, W. (2000) *Batman unmasked: analysing a cultural icon*, London: Continuum.
- Creed, B. (1993) *The Monstrous – Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge.
- Eco, U. (1994) *Κήνσορες και θεράποντες*, Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Γνώση.
- Elliott, A. (1999) *The mourning of John Lennon*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Erikson, E. (1990) *Η παιδική ηλικία και η κοινωνία*, Αθήνα: Καστανιώτης.
- Giddens, A. (1990) *Modernity and Self – Identity*, London: Polity Press.
- Grossberg, L. (1992) ‘Is there a fan in the house?: the affective sensibility of fandom’ in L. A. Lewis (ed.) *The adoring audience*, London: Routledge.
- Hoxter, J. (2000) “Taking possession: cult learning in *The Exorcist*” in X. Mendik and G. Harper (eds), *Unruly Pleasures: The cult film and its critics*, Guildford: FAB Press.
- Freud, S. (1905/1977) *On Sexuality: Three essays on the theory of sexuality and other works*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Freud, S. (1923/1984) ‘Beyond the pleasure principle’, in *On Metapsychology: The theory of psychoanalysis, ‘Beyond the pleasure principle’, ‘The Ego and the Id’ and Other Works*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Freud, S. (1927/1982) *Civilization and its discontents*, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.
- Καστοριάδης, Κ. (1978) *Η φαντασιακή θέσμιση της κοινωνίας, Ράππας*: Αθήνα.
- Klein, M. (1946/2000) “Notes on some schizoid mechanisms”, in P. du Gay, J. Evans and P. Redman (eds.), *Identity: A reader*, London: Sage.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981) *The Philosophy of moral development: Moral Stages and the Idea of – Justice*, San Francisco: Harper & Row.

- Lacan, J. (1949) “Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je”, In R.F.P. , XIII.
- Lukacs, G. (1960) *Histoire et conscience de classe*, Paris : Ed. de Minuit.
- McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media: The extension of man*, London: Routledge.
- Sandvoss, C. (2005) *Fans*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Stacey, J. (1994) *Stargazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship*, London: Routledge.
- Wertham, F. (1954) *Seduction of the innocent*, New York: Rinehart.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1951/2000) ‘Transitional objects and transitional phenomenon’, in P. Du Gay, I. Evans and P. Redman (eds), *Identity: a reader*, London: Sage.