

SUPERHEROES AND MEDIA: COMMENTARIES ABOUT THE AMERICAN
MEDIA IN MARK MILLAR AND BRIAN HITCH'S THE ULTIMATES

A Paper
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
North Dakota State University
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By

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In Partial Fulfillment
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Department:
English

December 2011

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University
Graduate School

Title

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Brian's Hitch's The Ultimates

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

Millar and Hitch's *The Ultimates*, a reboot of the Marvel Avengers published shortly after the events of 9/11, provides a critique of the role of the American media in American society and politics. By tracing instances where reader participation is required to complete meaning in the text, we can examine how the creators construct the text to engage the reader through: audience participation, the construction and use of panels, and by discussing how the media shapes the reactions of American viewers. The reader learns to examine the text for instances where media or media events occur and to critically examine these events. Millar and Hitch manipulate the function and shape of the panel in order to demonstrate the media's ability to edit and frame the content of events, leading readers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Gary Totten, Dr. Kevin Brooks, and the North Dakota State University English Department faculty for all their assistance and guidance in my academic career and the production of this thesis paper.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to my wonderful and supportive parents, Steven and Shaun Muzzy, and in memory of my grandparents.

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

Mark Millar and Brian Hitch's *The Ultimates* is what the comic industry refers to as a "reboot," in which older characters or teams of superheroes are re-imagined and modernized. While the characters and plotlines retain the basic aspects of their original counterparts, modernized superhero characters and teams appeal to a more contemporary audience. Reboots of superhero comics often have two purposes: to modernize characters for better marketability and to allow newer readers access to older characters or teams. Because superhero stories are often told in sequential order, it can be extremely difficult for a new reader to understand what is happening within a specific superhero character or in a specific superhero book. Rebooting teams and characters allows writers and artists to start over and provides an easy starting point for readers. It also allows the writer and artist the freedom to retell the story of the superhero or team's origin, to create new plotlines without having to reconcile the old plotlines, and to reshape characters, superhero teams, and the commentaries surrounding them.

Mark Millar and Brian Hitch's *The Ultimates* is a reboot of Marvel's popular superhero team The Avengers. Originally assembled and written by writer-editor Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby in 1963, the Avengers consisted of popular Marvel superheroes Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, The Hulk, Giant-Man, and Wasp who worked collaboratively to preserve America from villains and threats. Through the years, The Avengers' battles progressed from individual villains to national and eventually global threats to America. As the role of the superhero expanded, various writers and artists created storylines rich with potential for social and political commentary.

One of the ways that writers and artists are able to make their superheroes relevant to a contemporary audience is to weave commentaries about contemporary America culture into their storylines. 9/11 made the villains, plotlines, and battles depicted in superhero works eerily realistic, and several authors, including Bradford Wright, suggest that the impact of 9/11 is particularly important to superhero comics because superhero plots, violence, and villains seemed very similar to the events of 9/11 itself. In his essay “Captain America’s Empire: Reflection on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics,” Jason Dittner discusses how after 9/11 authors, media commentators, and even politicians criticized or critiqued *Captain America* because of the socio-political commentaries that it contained (628). The same media attention also extends to other comic book titles, including Millar and Hitch’s *The Ultimates* whose team leader is Captain America. *The Ultimates: Super-Human*, published in 2006, and *The Ultimates: Homeland Security*, published in 2006, capitalized on the issue of 9/11 and included several commentaries about post-9/11 America throughout the reboot, including issues such as pre-emptive strikes, terrorism, trauma, spousal abuse, race relations, and the relationship between media and celebrity. By doing so, they are able to re-imagine their heroes and to make them relevant to both current and potential readers.

As Hillary Chute discusses in “Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative,” beginning in the 1950s through the 1970s, comics “reflected seismic cultural shifts-- often produced by war-- in American culture of those decades; comics bridged the experimentalism of literary and visual modernisms and mass-produced American popular culture” (456). Citing *Mad Magazine* as the pioneer of this phenomenon, Chute notes that “the project of comics [is] a critique of mainstream America, particularly the

media” (456). *The Ultimates* was published shortly after the events of 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and their work provides a critique of how American reacted socially and politically in the wake of 9/11. By examining one particular thread, the role of the American media on American society and politics, we are able to see how the American media has the ability to shape reactions of the American people to specific events and even persons.

The Ultimates are a group of superpowered individuals assembled together by General Nick Fury in order to combat potential superhuman threats. The team consists of: wealthy entrepreneur and scientist Tony Stark who creates a suit of armor equipped with weaponry, flight, and combat technology; Bruce Banner, a disheveled scientist whose self-experimentation resulted in his uncontrollable jekyll-and-hyde mutation into a mindless, raging monster known as The Hulk; Janet and Hank Pym, two upstart scientists, one who is secretly a mutant with the ability to shift into a wasp-like state and one who is able to increase into superhuman size; Thor, a man who claims to be the actual Asgardian Thor and wields a powerful hammer and appears to command the weather; Captain America, a soldier injected with a top secret super soldier serum, frozen after sacrificing his life in World War II and brought back to life; and Black Widow and Hawkeye, two secret agent assassins who remain unknown to the American public. Set in contemporary America post-911, *The Ultimates* features recognizable celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and President Bush and focuses on the issues of post-9-11 America including terrorism and concerns about homeland security.

In order to explore how Millar and Hitch create commentaries throughout *The Ultimates*, it is useful to examine the critique of media throughout the text and how the

writer, artists, and reader work together to create this critique. By tracing instances where reader participation is required to complete meaning in the text, we can examine how they construct the text to engage the reader. In several panels throughout *The Ultimates*, in which the creators criticize the American media, it is apparent that a surface level reading does not suffice in order to fully understand the inferred commentary throughout the text. Instead, Millar and Hitch require a more sophisticated reader who is able to read and understand the visual and textual cues in order to participate in creation of the commentary. They achieve create their commentary in three ways: requiring audience participation, engaging the reader through the construction and use of panels, and demonstrating how the media is able to edit content in order to shape American public opinion of events.

First, Millar and Hitch use audience participation to actively engage the reader in constructing their commentary. Because the writer and artist provide certain details between which the reader draws connections between, they subtly manipulate the conclusions the reader will draw from the story. Additionally, the reader learns to examine the text for instances where media or media events occur and to critically examine these events, moving beyond a surface level reading of plot. Second, the writer and artist use the function and shape of the panels to demonstrate the media's ability to edit and frame the content of events. By illustrating how the writer and artist can use a panel to change the feeling and content of a frame, the creators demonstrate how easily a camera can edit and frame an event in real life. Finally, the writer and author discuss the correlation between the media depiction of the Ultimates and funding. They demonstrate this correlation between publicity and celebrity and the American people's perception of

the Ultimates team. Millar and Hitch use these tactics to reinforce the power and importance the media has within American society.

By actively engaging the reader to infer meaning in the physical structure and composition of the text and by orchestrating mistrust for the media and media personnel in the reader, Millar and Hitch create a rich commentary about the role of the media in American society.

CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of scholarly work on superhero texts can be classified into two categories: works about the historical evolution of comic books or works that attempt to define and explain terms and genre forms. Scholarship about comic books gives comics a historical lineage and defines it as a very diverse genre in terms of rhetoric, content, and form. Comic theorists such as Will Eisner and Scott McCloud explain the unique structures of comic books, legitimize comic books, and examine comics from a theoretical perspective.

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is perhaps the most widely recognized theoretical text about comics. Beginning with Eisner's definition of sequential art, McCloud defines and legitimizes comics by tracing their origins from ancient civilization to the modern period. He also defines the structure of comics, such as panels, time and modes, and iconography, and discusses how comic books use these genre characteristics to create stories and convey expressions in a way that differs from other literary and visual genres. McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is particularly important in its discussion of closure in comics. McCloud defines closure as the space between panels where the reader actively participates in the storyline, thus engaging in the act of creating the storyline. Millar and Hitch often use closure as a way to engage the reader in the creation of commentaries, increasing the likelihood they will recognize their commentaries and exhibit the emotional responses the creators desire.

While McCloud's *Understanding Comics* explains the complex nature of comics, *Making Comics* discusses how creators use the comic medium to tell stories or convey ideas. In this work, McCloud explores how the creator chooses what to include and what

to omit in panels; how to use panels to frame moments and guide the reader; how images and words work together to create meaning; how facial expressions and body language heighten storylines and add depth to characters or plotlines; and techniques for making comics, from the pen to computer applications. His work is particularly insightful because it explores how the creator uses the unique components of comics in order to engage and guide the reader through the story.

In his work *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, Eisner examines how storytelling is achieved through the combination of visual and literary elements to create a visual narrative. Eisner also notes how the reader's participation in creating the story influences how a writer and artist construct a storyline. Additionally, Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* provides a theoretical examination of how comics are constructed, which theorist Scott McCloud expands on in his work *Understanding Comics*. Divided into eight chapters, Eisner begins by arguing that comics require a reading of both the literary and visual text. His chapters discuss the function of imagery, timing, frames, and what he calls "expressive anatomy," the use of recognizable facial and bodily depictions, to aid in graphic storytelling. He then discusses how the writer and artist work together to fuse literary and visual elements into a coherent story.

Hillary Chute's essay, "Comics As Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," argues that the study of comics requires us to reexamine traditional literary categories such as fiction and narrative and to consider how comic's visual and verbal structure requires the reader to both read and look for meaning within the text. Although Chute's article focuses on non-fiction narratives, her arguments about historical representations in comics can also be applied to fictional narrative comics. She asserts that the reader must

read and interpret both verbal and visual elements in order to understand the entirety of a story or commentary, which is vital when examining how Millar and Hitch use both the visual and verbal in their work to create their commentaries. Additionally, her argument that comics provide a “critique of mainstream America, particularly the media,” is important in relation to their commentary, since one of the creator’s most blatant commentaries is about the role and function of the media in America.

Chute’s essay “‘The Shadow of a past Time’: History and Graphic Representation in ‘Maus’” examines Art Spiegelman’s 9/11 experience and its connection to his parents’ survival of the Holocaust. Chute’s essay focuses on how Spiegelman graphically represents the interweaving storylines in *Maus* through the use of panels, space, time, and other structural conventions unique to the genre. Chute’s essay is particularly useful in its argument about how “the medium of comics can approach and express serious, even devastating histories” (200). Her argument that the medium of comics can capture and make history into a readable form correlates directly to how Millar and Hitch also use the medium of comics to capture the social and political history of post-9/11 America.

Richard Reynold’s *Super Heroes, A Modern Mythology* begins with a brief history of the evolution of the superhero in comic books, defines what a superhero is, provides a list of common features in superhero stories, and outlines the structure and composition of superheroes as a genre. He discusses how the superhero is defined by his or her iconic costume, lists common themes throughout superhero comics, and examines how three key texts – *X-Men 108-143*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *The Watchmen* – exemplify the superhero iconography and reflect American culture. Reynold’s text is helpful for my examination of *The Ultimates* in its general overview of how superhero stories are

constructed and his discussion of general audience expectations of how superheroes should act, which applies specifically to how the Ultimates' public relations coordinator, Betty Ross, violates these expectations.

Danny Fingeroth's *Superman on the Couch* argues that superheroes are a reflection of American society. Fingeroth begins by tracing the mythical and religious origins of the superhero and then dedicates the remaining chapters to demonstrating the correlations between the superhero and American society. His work explores how our personal and societal structures are reflected in superheroes and superhero teams. Fingeroth's book is particularly insightful in its exploration of why superheroes, superhero teams, and superhero villains are constructed in the manner that they are and how that reflects American values. Fingeroth is helpful to my argument because of his assertion that superheroes rarely invoking change and usually upholding the status quo, while villains are often the catalyst for change, challenging or defying the status quo.

Comics and Ideology, edited by Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon, is a collection of essays examining ideology discussed through the medium of comics. In the introduction, the three editors argue that ideology is strongly tied to social power and the series of essays focuses on how social power is woven into various comic forms and how comics can be used to either support or refute the status quo and dominant social ideologies. Their introduction argues that comics are ideal for examining social ideologies because of the structure that allows the creator to guide the reader towards an ideological conclusion, which can be used to reinforce, examine, or challenge traditionally held ideologies. This is useful when exploring the role of ideology and media in Millar and Hitch's text.

Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America by Bradford Wright traces the evolution of the comic book beginning in the 1930s. Primarily focusing on the two major comic industry leaders, Marvel and DC comics, Wright traces how comics were shaped by the changing values of America and how comics can be used to examine socio-political ideologies throughout American history. Wright's work is particularly important to my paper because it provides a chronological approach to comic evolution from its creation to the events of 9/11, explores how wars and politics have both shaped and been shaped by comics, and ties the major changes in comic books to the major changes of the era in which they were produced.

McLuhan's *Understanding Media* provides insight on how the cool medium of comics requires the audience's participation. McLuhan argues how "Hot media are [...] low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience" (39). Comics are a cool medium because they require the audience's participation to create meaning, through what Scott McCloud describes as "closure." Because comics are a cool medium and require participation and completion by the audience, examining places where audience participation is particularly vital to the completion of the storytelling process allows us to examine how the writer and artist construct their commentaries and how they actively engage the reader. There are several places where a comic panel requires the reader to both read and interpret the image for meaning, or where the reader is required to connect several comic panels in order to understand what the creator is suggesting.

McLuhan and Fiore's *The Medium is the Massage, An Inventory of Effects* visually depicts McLuhan's argument that "societies are shaped more by the nature of the

media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication” (8). McLuhan and Fiore demonstrate this idea by juxtaposing images with McLuhan’s quotes. McLuhan further argues that “it is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media” (8) and examines how technology shapes every aspect of our lives from our identities to our education to war.

Art of Watching Film by Boggs and Petrie uses contemporary movies to teach film students how to examine films and what to look for when watching films. Boggs and Petrie also discuss basic film techniques, such as how a camera lens can be used to frame and edit the content it provides the viewer. It is useful to understand the basic film techniques that Boggs and Petrie introduce to their reader when examining how the creators use their comic panels to demonstrate the camera’s ability to edit and direct the audience.

Jean Baudrillard’s *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* discusses how the Gulf War was a media event and not an actual war, an idea that lends itself to the media manipulated battles of *The Ultimates* and how the media undermines the validity and truth of war. Baudrillard’s ideas are important to Millar and Hitch’s commentary because of his discussion of informational events—media clips that stand in for the actual event—and his discussion of how the media achieves a “clean war” by editing out most of the destruction and casualties. News interviews of the superheroes become informational events in *The Ultimates*, shifting the focus onto the superhero and away from the battle itself, and the media’s edited shots of the Hulk battle makes the event appear to be a “clean war.”

Mass Media, Politics, and Democracy by John Street examines how politicians and political institutions use the media to portray and sell themselves to the American people. Street discusses three dominant power structures of the media – discursive power, access power, and resource power. Discursive power focuses on the idea that knowledge is power and examines the correlation between the media’s ability to direct the actions of the American people. Access power discusses how mass media is able to control whose voices and interests are promoted and whose voices and interests are silenced. Resource power, which is most relevant to *The Ultimates*, refers to “the way in which the media conglomerates can affect the actions of governments and states” and how “governments need media conglomerates for the delivery of infrastructural services [...] and for the income and employment they generate” (236). Additionally, Street’s discussion of the four variants – liberal pluralism, new right, Marxism, and Culturalism—examines the four primary ways media is discussed. Millar and Hitch’s discussion of the media in *The Ultimates* is closest to the Marxism variant and using this variant to examine the text helps me illustrate the correlation between the media and funding in the creators’ text.

Steve M. Barkin’s *American Television News, The Media Marketplace and the Public Interest* provides a history of news broadcasting from the 1950s to the present. Barkin examines how marketing and advertising pressures caused news broadcasting to shift from serving public interest to marketing interests and from news broadcasting to tabloid broadcasting. Barkin’s work is particularly relevant to this paper in its discussion of how the media and advertising influence news reporting, primarily in the shift from hard news to soft news. The discussion of the creation of celebrities through the media,

such as the media's ability to turn people into easily recognizable celebrities marketable to the American people, is also particularly helpful when examining their commentary.

Doris A. Graber's *Mass Media and American Politics, Sixth Edition* examines the foundations of mass media in America, focusing primarily on television and newspapers, which Graber argues are still the chief sources of information for the majority of Americans. She begins by exploring the media institutions in America and the role of technology and politics in both shaping media and how media shapes technology and politics in return. She shifts to a discussion of law and politics surrounding media and discusses how the media functions in a variety of situations—from normal reporting to covering political institutions such as the justice system and Congress. Chapter five is the most pertinent to this paper because it examines how the media functions when covering extraordinary events such as crisis and terrorism. Since their work partially focuses on how the media functions after large scale battles, this chapter helps provide insight into how the actual American media tends to respond and shape these types of events, including when and why the media may withhold information and how it spins or portrays these events in order to direct the American viewer's response.

CHAPTER THREE. PARTICIPATION AND COMMENTARY

In order to understand how a comic creates a commentary, it is necessary to examine how the artists create the work and how the reader receives and perceives the work. Comics are “a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion” (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 65). As Scott McCloud states, “Comic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected movements. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). He notes that, unlike electronic media, “closure in comics is far from continuous and anything but involuntary” (68) and that “every act committed to paper by the comic artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader” (68). McCloud argues that the reader’s “deliberate, voluntary closure is comics’ primary means of simulating time and motion” (69). This suggests that comics require both the artist and the reader in order to function. By examining how the artists create a work, when and where the reader’s participation is required, and how the reader provides closure and participation, we can see how the creation of a commentary functions in a comic work.

Before examining each of the individual panels to explore how the creators make their commentary, it is useful to see how the page layout itself functions. The page in figure 1 is divided into three panels (Fig. 1). The first panel, despite occupying the same physical amount of space, feels larger when the eye first scans the page because the reader’s eye must move through images, such as all the different people and the signs, in order to interpret the panel. This draws in the reader’s eye and holds it there the longest of the three panels because of the vibrant colors and feeling of motion. In contrast, the

other panels have a feeling of stagnation because of the muted colors and lack of motion. The first panel also includes striping and a light affect added to the image, giving it the visual sensation of being a television screen. The other panels are visually smoother in appearance, giving them the sensation of being real when contrasted to the first panel's television image.



Fig. 1. The Television Versus Bruce Banner's Perception of the Battle. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 2: Homeland Security*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

The first panel creates the sensation of movement, a phenomenon McCloud refers to as “motion within panels” (116), through images that imply movement, which, in this particular panel, contain balloons floating, signs waving, and people gesturing. In his chapter “Time Frames,” McCloud discusses how the eye must move from image to image and how each of these eye movements requires time for the reader to physically read and

consume the text. In this case, the eye moves from the balloons to the each of the individual people's gestures and expressions and pauses to read the words on the individual signs. Thus, the more movement in a single panel, the more time is required of the reader to perceive all of the motion occurring in the panel. This creates the feeling of extended time as well as the creation of motion, which engages the reader's attention.

Visually, Millar and Hitch use this first panel to express the sensationalism that television can create for the reader by engaging them in the panel in the same way that a television image engages viewers (Fig. 2). The reader draws from "commonality of experience" and "life experience" (*Comics and Sequential Art* 7) in order to create meaning. Readers are familiar with a parade's movement and exuberance and the feeling of joy and celebration created by such events. This immediately engages the reader's emotional response and holds the reader's attention longer because of the amount of time required to examine the numerous visual elements in the panel. Because this first panel initially engages the reader far longer than the other panels on the page, the reader would assume this panel must contain the most important content of the page. The creators "dramatize or disrupt the visual narrative threads" (Chute 460) with Bruce Banner's thought balloon, which visually interrupts the first image with his cynical comment, "Look at them—jumping around like little puppets. It must be strange to think the world's about to end and then a bunch of people in costumes just show up and save the day, huh?" (Fig. 2).

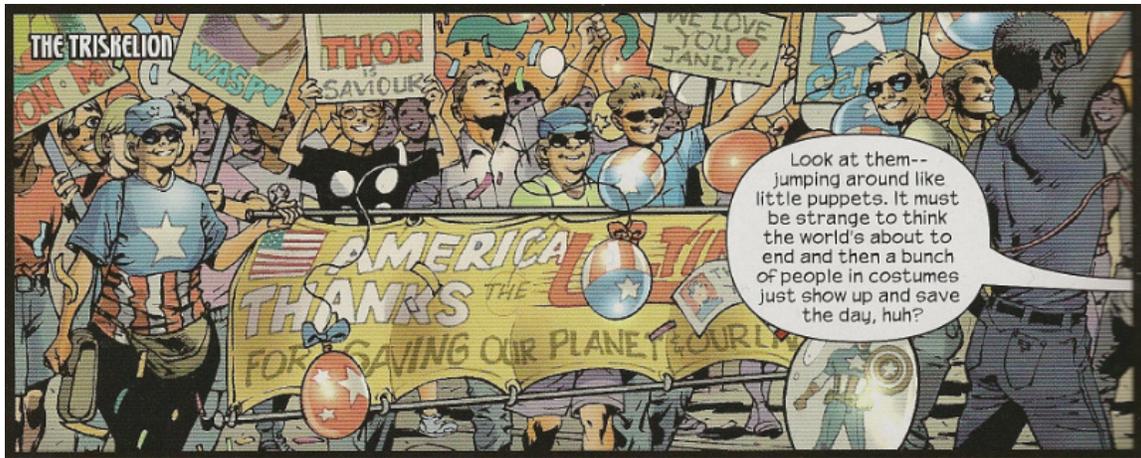


Fig. 2. The Televised Ticker-tape Parade. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 2: Homeland Security*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

Like the audience portrayed in the panel, the celebration image leads the reader to believe that the Ultimates have just achieved their first victory. The reader is likely to feel excited and proud of the superheroes and excited by their victory because of the cues provided to them in the panel. However, the significant visual message in the first panel is undercut by the literary portion of the panel. The celebration becomes ridiculous and absurd instead of jubilant and celebratory. Millar and Hitch set up the reader to see one thing, then feel another. They are able to expose the reader to the fallacy of the television image through the audiences' own participation. As Marshall McLuhan asserts in *Understanding Media*, "the modern comic strip and comic book provide very little data about any particular moment in time, or aspect in space, of an object" and "the comic book and TV as cool media involve the user, as maker and participant, a great deal" (218-19). Because comics are a cool medium, the creators use a type of "bait-and-switch" approach in order to actively engage the reader in exposing the fallacy of that celebration. By having the reader complete the meaning of the panels, the story can have two affects on the reader. On the one hand, the reader may feel ashamed or even mocked by the

authors themselves. Or readers may feel superior if they did not buy the celebration in the panel, creating a sense that the readers were “in on the joke” and allying them with the authors in mocking the gullible people celebrating in the panel and, by further extension, other potential readers who may not have “gotten it.” Either way, the reader is likely to feel suspicious when encountering any media images or media events throughout the rest of the graphic novel, increasing the likelihood they will pay more critical attention to what these particular panels or moments suggest and making them better able to spot the text’s commentary about the way media functions in American society.

As the reader continues down the page, Millar and Hitch further undermine this same celebration. The transition between these two panels is what McCloud refers to as a subject-to-subject panel transition, meaning the panels stay “within a scene or idea” and “the degree of reader involvement necessary to render these transitions meaningful” is greater (71). The creators shift visually from an upbeat parade to a beaten, emotionally broken Bruce Banner (Fig. 3) in order to juxtapose media and reality.

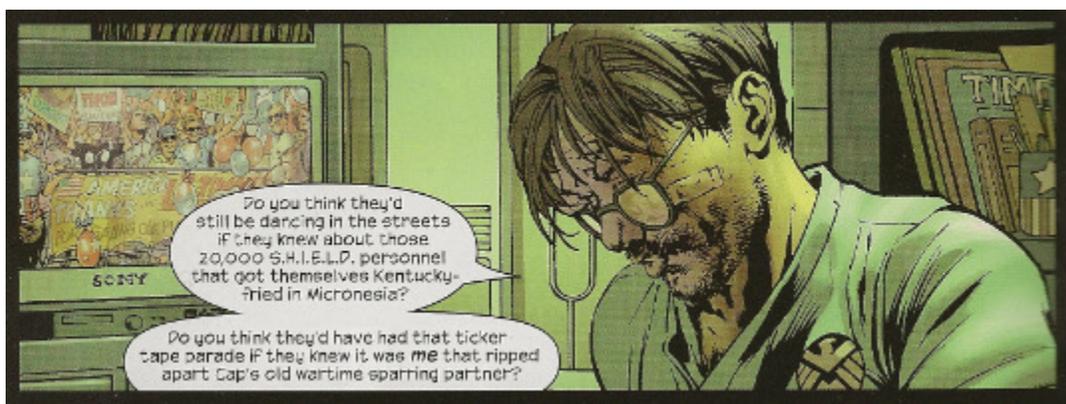


Fig. 3. The Cost of the Battle According to Bruce Banner. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 2: Homeland Security*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

Visually, Bruce Banner occupies about half the physical space of the panel with the television set in the left corner (Fig. 3). The image of the parade, which consumed the entire first panel, is now small and nearly unnoticeable when compared to Banner. Interestingly, if readers do not look closely at the panel, they can miss the television image altogether. In this panel, Banner continues his monologue by adding, “Do you think they’d be dancing in the streets if they knew about those 20,000 S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel that got themselves Kentucky-fried in Micronesia? Do you think they’d have had that ticker-tape parade if they knew it was me that ripped apart Cap’s old wartime sparring partner?” His speech balloon physically interrupts the image of the television once again, which visually represents how the content of his speech undermines the television image. If Banner mocked the reaction to the Ultimates’ victory in the first panel, he exposes the fallacies of the television image in this second panel by discussing the information that the television image leaves out – the cost of the victory. Banner’s statement directly contradicts the previous victory image by reminding the reader of the cost of the battle, the lives of the soldiers who aren’t even mentioned, and that the Hulk is the true reason the enemy was defeated.

The creators continue their commentary in the third panel by shifting to a facial shot of Banner, who reflects on the aftermath of the battle (Fig. 4). They use a moment-to-moment transition between the second and third panels, which, McCloud asserts, requires little closure. As McCloud discusses, “As unlikely as it sounds, the panel shape can actually make a difference in our perception of time. Even though this longer panel has the same basic ‘meaning’ as its shorter versions, still it has the feeling of greater length” (101). While the first panel requires more time in order to perceive all the motion

in the panel, the third panel creates the feeling of elongated time by focusing the reader on Bruce Banner's lamenting face; the creators extend the panel to the right with little to no visual content, creating the feeling of empty space. By creating the sensation of empty space, the gravity of Banner's lamenting feels greater to the reader and forces the reader to focus on Banner. As Eisner argues, empathy is "perhaps the most basic of human characteristics" and using empathy to engage the reader "enables the storyteller to evoke an emotional contact with the reader" (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* 47). By focusing closely on Banner's face, Millar and Hitch create a sense of empathy between Banner and the reader. This increases the likelihood that the reader will not only perceive Banner's pain, but that the reader will emotionally connect with Banner.



Fig. 4. Banner's Personal Trauma After the Battle. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 2: Homeland Security*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

In just three panels, the creator's commentary moves from mockery to criticism to invoked sympathy, all of which examines how the media functions. By actively engaging the reader in the creation of the commentary and utilizing closure, the artists are able to manipulate how the reader might view the post-battle events and increase the likelihood that the reader will question the validity and function of the media throughout

The Ultimates. Having cued the reader to examine the text for how the media functions in *The Ultimates*, Millar and Hitch demonstrate how the media is able to manipulate the American people through the use of the camera lens.

CHAPTER FOUR. CAMERAS AND CONTENT

As Reynolds explains in his chapter “Masked Heroes” in *Superheroes, a Modern Mythology*, the second great era of comic sales and readership in the 1960s and 1970s was dominated by Marvel comics, whose writers and artists were able to engage readers by “creating a wealth of exciting new titles that mixed protagonists more in tune with the mores of the period, and kept an eye for the visual and verbal ironies inherent in situating super-powered characters against a background that purported to represent the ‘real’ world” (9). This provided a way for comic creators to keep superheroes relevant and to engage the audience in issues and topics they were concerned about. The superhero, despite being a fantastical person in a fantastical world, could be used to examine contemporary anxieties and concerns and provides a way to explore these issues.

When the creators rebooted The Avengers in *The Ultimates*, one of the ways they made the storyline contemporary was to depict how media functioned in relation to the superhero team and American society. Two of the commentaries the creators make about the function of the media in American society is 1) how it transforms an individual into a celebrity and 2) how it sells consensus to the American people through careful editing and manipulation of what the media image selects or omits, for example the battle wreckage omitted after the Hulk battle. McCloud’s assertion that reader participation is required in order to complete the message created by the author is useful when examining how they use the comic panel to demonstrate how the media can edit content, shape how an event is perceived, and direct how the audience responds to the information provided. In chapter six of *The Ultimates*, Millar and Hitch provide the reader with four panels- two

that represent reality and two that represent media versions of reality- in order to engage the reader in their critique of how the media can manipulate and shape truth.

By juxtaposing panels that depict reality with panels that depict how the media portrays reality and edits content, the creators demonstrate how the camera lens edits the content it provides the viewer. As McCloud suggests, the panel functions like a camera lens in the selection of information that writer and penciler wish to convey to the audience and how they use the physical space of a panel to help direct the response of the audience (*Making Comics* 24). McCloud notes that “choosing how to frame moments in comics is like choosing camera angles in photography and film. There are differences—such as the role that size, shape, and position have on comic panels—but to think of that frame as the reader’s camera is a useful metaphor. This is the device by which you can grab the reader by the shoulder, guide them to the right spot, and tell them ‘you are here’” (24). To demonstrate how a camera and a comic panel can select what to show or omit from the viewer, they show readers the difference between reality and the media versions of the battle outcome and how the media shapes the public’s response to the battle.

Additionally, by manipulating how the reader’s eye is directed visually throughout these panels, the creators suggest how powerful the media can be in directing the viewer. The creators provide the reader with the real images of the battle juxtaposed with the media versions of the battle and allow the reader to infer the difference between the two. As Hillary Chute notes, the “reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning” (452). The reader reads these panels for content and meaning, but also looks for the differences between them, thus participating in Millar and Hitch’s

commentary about the difference between the real and media panels. This increases the likelihood that the reader will understand how the media edits and manipulates information and accept their commentary about how the media can manipulate informational events in order to sell consensus and make celebrities out of the Ultimates.

In order to better understand the commentary being made in Chapter 3, it's important to examine the compositions on page 2 and 3 to understand how the creators comment on the difference between reality and the media and how they engage the reader in reading and looking for meaning (Fig. 5). The first panel on page 2 and the last panel on page 3 represent the actual or real battle aftermath while the last panel on page 2 and the first panel on page 3 represent the edited media version of the battle. Both the real and media battle panels are visually interrupted by television-shaped panels in the middle of the page. McCloud notes that, "Conditioned as we are to read left-to-right and up-to-down, a mischievous cartoonist can play any number of tricks on us" (*Understanding Comics* 105), and the creators employ such a trick on the reader in these two pages by inverting the order of importance and visually manipulating the reader's eye away from the "real" images and towards the media images, demonstrating the media's ability to distract from reality with sensational imagery.

The large concentration of black juxtaposed with the large white word balloons in the middle of both pages visually catches the reader's eye before any other panels on the pages (Fig. 5). These informational events are supposed to be real time footage, but instead are snippets of media that stand in for real time information. In *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Jean Baudrillard discussed how informational events stand in for real events. Thus "'real time' information loses itself in a completely unreal space, finally

furnishing the images of pure, useless, instantaneous television where its primordial function irrupts, namely that of filling a vacuum, blocking up the screen hole” (Baudrillard 31). These middle television comic panels function as informational events where the superheroes comment on themselves or teammates, shifting the focus away from the battle and onto themselves as heroes, blocking up the television screens with images of the superheroes instead of the battle itself.



Fig. 5. After the Battle with The Hulk. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 1: Super-Human*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

Next, the reader’s eyes move to the large image of Thor and Iron Man, primarily because they are depicted in more vivid colors and contain one large, central image for the eye to focus on. Finally, the eye moves to the wreckage scenes, which are rendered in mostly muted colors and have very little movement. This type of panel is called a

“bleed,” where a panel is expanded out to the page edges and is used to “open up a scene – not just because of the increased panel sizes – but also because they’re no longer contained by the panel border and can, well... ‘bleed’ into our world” (McCloud *Making Comics* 162-163). They purposely omit words from these scenes in order to create silence, which, as McCloud notes, “has the effect of removing a panel from any particular span of time. Without that implicit time stamp which words provide, a silent panel doesn’t ‘end’ quite as crisply and the effect of it can linger throughout a page” (164-165). This allows readers more time to explore the contents of the panels and leaves them with a lasting impression that they can carry with them throughout the reading of these two pages. This lingering impression helps ensure that the reader feels a contrast between the “real” panels and the busy media panels. This composition purposely inverts the hierarchy of importance for the reader. Instead of directing the reader to spend the majority of time on the real outcome of the battle, the creators visually invert the hierarchy of meaning in order to trick the reader’s eye. By doing so, they visually mimic the media’s ability to direct attention away from the actual battle to the media versions, which focus on the individual superhero in order to shift the audience’s attention away from the battle and to make the superheroes into celebrities.

Millar and Hitch further engage the reader and use the panels to illustrate the difference between reality and the media version of reality by exercising what McCloud refers to as “choice of frame” in which the comic creator must “decide how closely to frame an action to show all the pertinent details or how to pull back to let the reader know where an action is taking place and maybe give a sense of being there in the process” (19). In the realistic battle panels, the creators pull back from the scene, allowing the

reader the sensation of actually witnessing the magnitude of the aftermath of the battle (Fig. 6). The building wreckage occupies the majority of the panel's physical space and the muted colors suggest dust settling around the wreckage. The few firefighters stand out in the crowd due to the large concentrations of black against an almost monochromatic color scheme. The crowd looks small in comparison to the large wreckage scene, and Captain America in grey scale is barely visible in the panel waving his shield in the middle of the rubble.

The last panel on page 3 functions in a similar fashion as the first panel on page 2 (Fig. 6). This scene shows an unconscious, bloody Giant Man lying in the wreckage of the Hulk battle. Several firefighters stand on and about Giant Man and amongst the wreckage. Despite being the most important panels informationally, these panels go almost unnoticed by the reader in comparison to the panels on pages 2 and 3.



Fig. 6. The Hulk Battle Wreckage Scenes. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 1: Super-Human*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

Juxtaposed with the real battle images are the fourth and fifth panels, which feature Thor and Iron Man surrounded by crowds (Fig. 7). Although these panels are still bleed panels, they are careful cropped so the direct focus is on the superhero surrounded by an approving crowds and little of the battle wreckage is visible. These panels represent

a camera lens view of the incident and demonstrate how the media can omit what information to show the audience. In this panel, the wreckage is almost entirely excluded. The crowd also appears larger in size than the crowd in the realistic first panel. These panels create the feeling of what Baudrillard refers to as a “clean war,” where “no accidents occurred in this war, everything unfolded according to programmatic order, in the absence of passional disorder” (73). By editing out the wreckage scene and shifting the focus to the superheroes, the media depicts the Ultimates’ intervention as clean and orderly in order to sell the necessity and capability of the team.

By showing the superheroes surrounded by large cheering, approving crowds, the televised images also give the television viewer the impression that the majority of people support the Ultimates and are grateful for their heroic presence. Additionally, focusing on the individual superhero increases the likelihood that the superheroes will become recognizable to the American television audience, making them identifiable celebrities. This increases the chances that the team will continue to receive favorable public support and funding. As Jean Baudrillard argues, “Information has a profound function of deception. It matters little what it ‘informs’ us about, its ‘coverage’ of events matters little since it is precisely no more than a cover: its purpose is to produce consensus by flat encephalogram” (68). Through careful editing, the media is able to turn a chaotic, poorly handled battle into a victory and sell the superheroes as a necessary protection to the American people. The media sells the idea of consensus amongst the American people that the heroes saved the day.



Fig. 7. Iron Man, Thor, and the Cheering Crowds. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 1: Super-Human*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

In these panels, the creators again use a bate-and-switch approach to create their commentary, but this time they include the reader. They provide the reader with both reality and media panels so the reader is able to differentiate between the real outcome of the battle and the edited media version of the outcome. By placing the real battle images next to the media images, Millar and Hitch expose the fallacy of the media images and illustrates how they are manipulated. As Reynold’s explains, satire is “the most effective form of social comment in superhero narrative is satire. It has always been possible to use the satirical method from inside the political consensus or status quo in order to denounce the outstanding follies and abuses of the age—without suggesting or accepting that there is anything fundamentally wrong with the status quo’s ideology” (77). The creators satirize the media’s version of the battle by contrasting it with the real and constructing the narratives and visuals in a way that requires the audience’s participation and awareness. Because of this, the reader is likely to mistrust the media’s depiction of reality.

Millar and Hitch’s commentary about the way the media controls and directs an audience’s response to events is achieved with the reader’s participation in creating the commentary. By engaging the reader to differentiate between reality and media versions

of reality, they are able to direct how the reader is likely to respond to the idea of manipulation and editing by the media, increasing the likelihood the reader will agree with Millar and Hitch's criticism of the media's ability to manipulate the American people.

CHAPTER FIVE. SELLING THE SUPERHERO

Throughout *The Ultimates*, media is manipulated for one main purpose: to sell the Ultimates as superheroes in order to secure funding for the project. Street divides media power into four variants-- Liberal Pluralism, New Right, Marxist, and Culturalism. Millar and Hitch's text falls mostly into the Culturalism, which "sees the media as inextricably tied to the dominant interest in society," where media institutions produce consensus, and where the values of the dominant group shape all media representations from news to entertainment programs to film (243). The goal of the media selling the superheroes as celebrities is to create a collective consensus among the American public that the superheroes are able to do their job and are necessary to secure America's safety, therefore justifying their necessity and ensuring ongoing funding for the project.

Early in *The Ultimates: Volume 1*, when asked why General Fury doesn't enlist the aid of the superhero team The Fantastic Four, Fury responds "After all the negative press they've been getting from their neighbors lately? Don't even think about it, cowboy. The budget cuts we're making in the regular army are going to make us a political hot potato as it is" (Fig. 8). Fury makes a direct connection between press and funding. He refuses to enlist the aid of an already known and established superhero team because their negative publicity could directly impact the Ultimates' funding. This reinforces Street's assertion that "the culturalist sees the audience as interpreting media representations, not just ingesting them" and "the audience has to make sense of what it sees and reads" (243-244). Fury understands that the American audience will critically examine the superheroes and that negative publicity could easily cause the audience to reject The Ultimates, undermining the Ultimates' ability to secure ongoing funding.

A few panels later, when Stark accuses Fury of enlisting him just for his celebrity endorsement, Fury responds with “Never made a secret of it, Tony. You’re a trusted brand name in everything from internet software to aspartame-polluted diet soda” (Fig. 9). Fury once again makes a direct correlation between funding and the celebrity status. In this instance, Stark’s popularity, participation in the team, and recognizability become a commodity that can be used by the Ultimates to sell the necessity of the team to the American people. As Street asserts, “Certain identities [...] are ‘normalized’ while others are represented as ‘alien’” (244). Identities that are considered normal are often viewed as favorable while identities that are considered abnormal are often viewed with suspicion, hostility, or rejection. The Fantastic Four are viewed as alien, or unfavorable, while Stark is seen as favorable. While he is not “normal” in the traditional sense, he is easier to sell to the American people because of his positive celebrity image and because he already well liked and well received. The military’s selection of the team members for the Ultimates not only resides in their actual abilities as heroes, but if they can be marketed and sold to the American people.

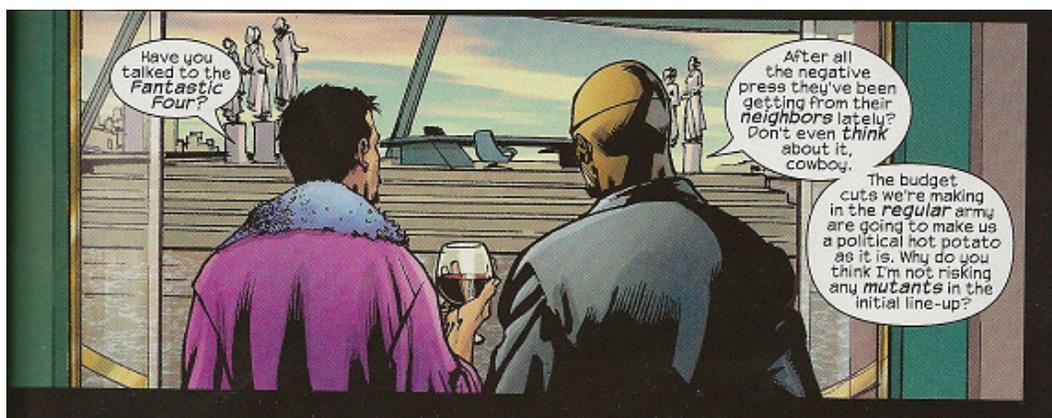


Fig. 8. Tony and Fury Discussing Possible Team Members. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 1: Super-Human*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.



Fig. 9. Tony's Celebrity Appeal. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 1: Super-Human*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

Fury's preoccupation with the connection between funding and media is echoed at the end of *The Ultimates: Volume 2* after the Hulk defeats the aliens. Fury reflects on the newspaper report and is astounded that some claim the invasion "was all just a plot to justify our latest multi-billion dollar cash-injection from Congress when everybody else was tightening up their belts" (Fig. 10). The reader understands the irony of Fury's disbelief that some Americans are skeptical about the validity of the attack because the first publicized battle the Ultimates "won" was actually against their own teammate Bruce Banner, which Ross was able to spin into a victory by convincing the public that Banner and The Hulk were two different people. Besides pointing out the irony that skeptical people question the battle, Fury again makes the connection between funding and the media. The correlation between making the Ultimates famous and securing ongoing funding reflects McLuhan's idea that "a new form of 'politics' is emerging, and

in ways we haven't yet noticed. The living room has become a voting booth" (*The Medium is the Massage* 22). McLuhan's notion that television can be used as a political vehicle correlates to Fury's belief that the American people's perception of the team impacts governmental funding. Culturalism explains this phenomenon of multiple readings. As Street explains, "Media texts constrain the possible readings, and each contains a 'preferred' version" (244). The majority of the audience interpreted the alien invasion the way the media attempts to promote it, as a victory, while others are skeptical that the event was real.

Fury's comments on funding early and late in the story are not coincidental. Initially, these comments are meant to introduce the reader to the correlation between funding and media, prompting the reader to look for examples where the media's ability to help secure funding is discussed. Later, these comments remind the reader to re-examine the story for these instances if they have forgotten or missed reading for this correlation. This also emphasizes Fury's preoccupation with media and funding.

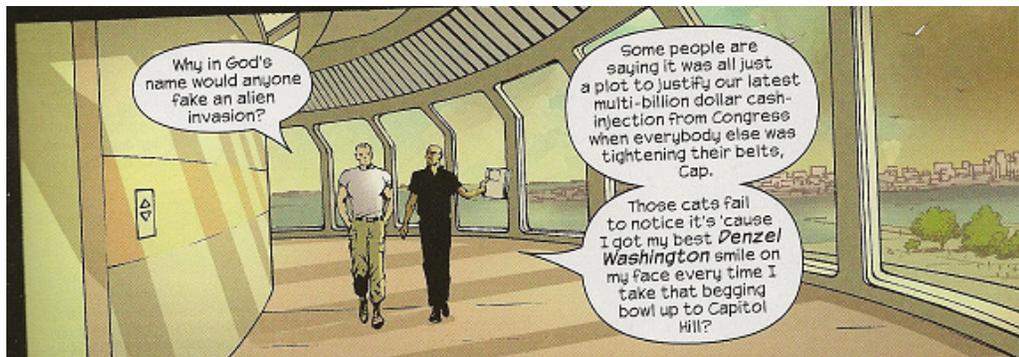


Fig. 10. A Faked Invasion. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 2: Homeland Security*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

Another way the creators make the correlation between funding and media is expressed through the Ultimates' publicity events. In chapter 3, "21st Century Boy," the

reader is introduced to the Ultimates' Director of Communications, Betty Ross, at a launch party held for the superhero team at Triskelion, a multi-million dollar event featuring celebrities and President Bush. When Fury questions Ross about the amount of money and personnel being used for the event, Ross retorts, "The difference between us and Hollywood, General, is that I'm going to make the Ultimates really famous" (Fig. 11). The reader has already been introduced to the idea of media and funding and the connection between public recognition and government funding by Fury. Ross's assertions that she will make the Ultimates into celebrities echoes Fury's belief that celebrity status means ongoing funding. As John Fiske argues, "Discourse represents the world by producing a knowledge of it and thus exercising power over it" (15). Ross's publicity stunts are a way of creating producing knowledge and discourse about the Ultimates in order to persuade the American people the superhero team is a necessity and to ensure ongoing funding.

In the second Ultimates' PR event, Ross stages a televised training exercise which goes awry when the only Ultimates team member who shows up is Giant Man. Frustrated by the absence of the Ultimates, Ross snaps, "As far as the media are going to be concerned, we're promoting a super-team consisting entirely of Giant Man" (Fig. 12). Ross's frustration reflects the idea that, as Barkin notes, "in general, for the author, politician, or actor who is engaged in promoting a new project, each appearance on a news program becomes part of a carefully orchestrated campaign aimed at the success of the project. [...] News at all levels becomes part of a well-timed process of promotion" (124). Ross introduced the world to the Ultimates with her gala event, now she must demonstrate their legitimacy by showing their physical capabilities to the American



Fig. 11. Ross and Fury at the Gala. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 1: Super-Human*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

people. When the team members fail to show up, they jeopardize Ross's promotional strategy and undermine her ability to make the Ultimates easily recognizable celebrities to the American people. Ross has already created discourse about The Ultimates through her Gala debut, but she must ensure the discourse continues in order to ensure the Ultimates receive ongoing funding through continuous media exposure and publicity of the team.



Fig. 12. Ultimates Training Exercise Publicity Event. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 1: Super-Human*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

After Betty Ross verbally belittles Bruce Banner, he injects himself with the super soldier serum and releases the Hulk within him. Rampaging through New York, the Hulk kills nearly one hundred thousand people and causes mass destruction to the city.

Despite the magnitude of the incident, Ross manages to turn the Ultimates' debacle into a victory. When Fury turns to Ross and asks her how she plans on handling the press, Ross calmly asserts, "Oh, come on now, Nick. That's easy— just hush up the Bruce Banner connection and all your little super people here go down in history as heroes who saved Manhattan, of course" (Fig. 13). And with one phone call, Ross is able to do just that — she turn the Ultimates from perpetrators into heroes.

While Ross is able to cover up the connection between Banner and the Hulk to the American people, the traditional characteristics of the superhero are undermined by this incident. Defining a superhero, Danny Fingeroth lists primary characteristics as: “some sort of strength of character (though it may be buried), some system of (generally-thought-to-be) positive values, and a determination to, no matter what, protect those values” (17). Those values are traditionally “summed up by the Superman tag of Truth, Justice, and the American Way” (Reynolds 74). Ross is part of the superhero team and the reader may expect her to act according to these set of values. Additionally, the fact that the rest of the Ultimates allow Ross to cover up the Hulk incident rather than to allow justice to be served further undermines the team’s heroics. Manipulating information and hiding the truth from the American people in the name of publicity, funding, and celebrity status for the superhero team violates the reader’s expectations of a superhero. Ross clearly violates the first two by hiding the truth of the Hulk incident from the American people and, by doing so, also obstructs justice, turning the battle from a crime into a heroic act through her manipulation of the information that the media provides to the American public. Ross manipulates this information by filming the superheroes surrounded by cheering crowds and having them interviewed by several talk shows. As a result, they become celebrities to the American people.

Ross is able to manipulate how the public views the Ultimates through what Doris Graber refers to as muted coverage. According to Graber, muted coverage:

Generally leads to presentation of the official story only and suppression of unofficial news. The perspectives of civilian and military public security personnel become paramount and accepted by much of the public. As a result,

security aspects are stressed, rather than the cause of violent behavior and the political and social changes, including new public policies, that might prevent future violence. (152)

This takes place in what Graber calls stage two of an extraordinary event crisis, the stage during which “the media try to correct past errors and put the situation into proper perspective” and often “try to shape political fallout from the event in ways that support their policy preferences,” (143) or in Ross’s case, justifying the necessity and funding of the Ultimates. By employing muted coverage of the event, Ross is able to sell the superhero team as a security measure necessary to the American people’s well-being.

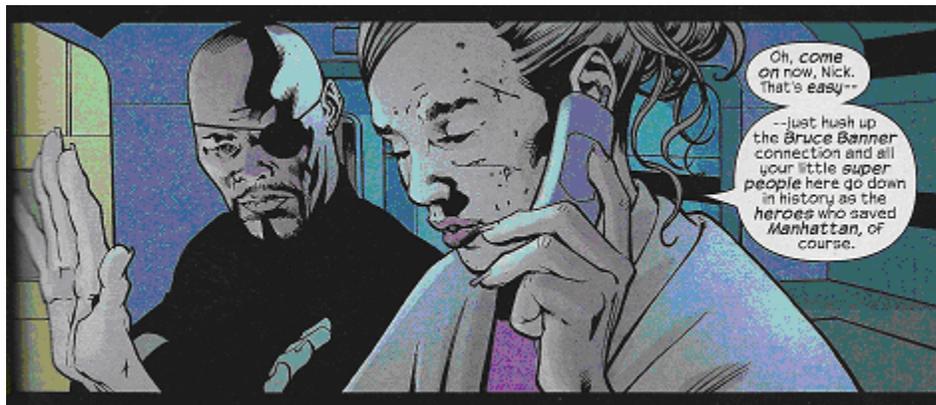


Fig. 13. Betty Ross Covers Up The Hulk/Bruce Banner Connection. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 1: Super-Human*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

Perhaps the more disturbing publicity stunt Ross creates is Captain America’s eulogy speech at the funeral for those killed in the Hulk battle. In this scene, Millar and Hitch once again use the bate-and-switch tactic similar to the one used in Banner’s reflection on the news coverage of the alien battle victory. The eulogy scene opens with a full splash page of the Cathedral, a full page of mourning citizens, and pictures of the people killed in the Hulk battle. As Eisner explains, one way for the creators to direct

readers is through “relevance to his interest and understanding” by creating “stories that provide a view of human behavior under various conditions” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* 50). The creators are able to direct the reader’s response by depicting photographs and crowds mourning, which reminds reader of familiar scenes, such as the memorials left at Ground Zero after 9/11 (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Images of Mourning. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 2: Homeland Security*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

Millar and Hitch continue to draw on the reader's empathy in Captain America's eulogy speech, which spans two pages and is juxtaposed with Janet Pym, who is being taken to the hospital in critical condition after a domestic dispute with her husband, fellow Ultimate Giant Man (Fig. 15). The reader simultaneously mourns for those killed in the Hulk incident and fears for Janet Pym's life. They purposely heighten the reader's emotional response and create a feeling of empathy for the deceased through Captain America's eulogy. The images of the crowds mourning and Captain America's speech can have two effects: the reader can believe that Captain America's eulogy speech is sincere or the reader may be cynical or even suspicious of the motives behind Captain America's speech, since it was Captain America's own teammate who caused these deaths and who remains unpunished.

Immediately after the funeral is finished, Ross turns to Fury and says, "Word just in from the focus groups, General Fury – absolutely humongous post-service approval rating. I told you getting Captain America to read the eulogy wouldn't come off as too cheesy. Our target demographic absolutely adores all that hokey old soldier crap" (Fig. 16). First, this scene serves as another reference to the connection between the public perception of the Ultimates and funding. Ross's statement echoes the Culturalism notion that "All pictures are just that, portraits of the world giving a particular view of reality, an encoding that has to be decoded by the reader or viewer. Reality is a matter of representation" (244). Because reality is a matter of representation, Ross is able to sell the idea of Captain America's eulogy speech to the American people through the image of Captain America as the benevolent soldier. Ross also refers to a particular portion of the American people a target demographic, objectifying a group of people after the reader



Fig. 15. Captain America's Eulogy Speech. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 2: Homeland Security*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

has just mourned the death of numerous individuals. Second, this scene serves to undermine the pathos Millar and Hitch create by exposing the eulogy speech as a marketing ploy drummed up by Ross. Third, it reinforces the idea that any public event or public gesture made by a member of the Ultimates may be nothing more than a marketing ploy, increasing the likelihood that the reader will find any public gesture made by an Ultimate team member or associate suspicious.

As McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon argue, comics are often “highly ego-involving for many readers, children and adult” (4-5) and perhaps what is most ego-bruising is that Ross’s publicity stunt not only worked on the American people in the story, but may have also worked on the reader themselves. By contrast, the readers who did not believe the sincerity of Captain America’s speech may feel superior to those who believed Captain America’s speech because their suspicions are confirmed when Captain America’s speech is exposed as a marketing ploy. By involving the emotions of the reader and by depicting Ross negatively as the public relations representative of the Ultimates, Millar and Hitch, by extension, critique the manipulation of the American people’s response to a media event and that it is used as means to secure funding.

To emphasize Ross’s transgression, the creators use Fury’s retort to echo the reaction Millar and Hitch wish for the reader to have towards Ross’s actions: “What’s the matter with you, Betty? You born without an off switch or something?” (Fig. 16). Instead of apologizing or making some kind of redemptive statement, Ross snidely retorts, “Oh, sure. Like you were in there praying for all the itty-bitty children, soldier-boy” (Fig. 16). Visually, Ross’s facial expression utilizes what McCloud refers to as “an element of stylization or exaggeration to produce a mock version” of a real facial

expression (90), which stylistically works to heighten her sarcastic, accusatory response to Fury's scolding. Ross's comment, coupled with her facial expression, makes Ross's character unsympathetic to the reader because she mocks not only Fury's response, but possibly the reader's response, as well. As Bradford Wright notes, "beginning in the mid-1980s, the market became saturated with variations on Frank Miller's brand of morally complex and ruthless superheroes"(272), and the creators continue this tradition in their comic by making the motives of their superheroes questionable. Instead of protecting the American people and securing their safety, the Ultimates not only become the perpetrators, but also the perpetrators who go unpunished and even rewarded for their wrongs. They are able to do so through Ross's careful manipulation of how the Ultimates are portrayed in the media.



Fig. 16. Betty Ross at Public Funeral for Hulk Victims. Millar, Mark (w) and Bryan Hitch (i). *The Ultimates, Vol. 2: Homeland Security*. Ed. Ralph Macchio. NY: Marvel Comics, 2006.

The importance of the media and funding and its connection to the Ultimates team is stated several times throughout the story. The constant concern with media perception,

media recognizably, and turning the Ultimates into celebrities ties back to the correlation between their media image and funding for the project. Millar and Hitch use these tactics to reinforce the power and importance the media has within American society, echoing the Culturalism assertion that “People’s sense of themselves and their world is constituted through these discourses. These are the expression of relations of power” (244). The creators expose the manipulation of the American people through Betty Ross’s publicity stunts in order to criticize the power the media has in directing the response of the American people.

CHAPTER SIX. CONCLUSION

Millar and Hitch's *The Ultimates*, a reboot of the Marvel Avengers published shortly after the events of 9/11, provides a critique of the role of the American media in American society and politics. By tracing instances where reader participation is required to complete meaning in the text, we can examine how the creators construct the text to engage the reader. They achieve this in three ways: audience participation, the construction and use of panels, and by discussing how the media shapes the reactions of American viewers. First, Millar and Hitch use audience participation to actively engage the reader in constructing their commentary by providing the reader with details the reader must decipher. Through active participation in the text, the reader learns to examine the text for instances where media or media events occur and to critically examine these events. Second, Millar and Hitch manipulate the function and shape of the panel in order to demonstrate the media's ability to edit and frame the content of events. Finally, Millar and Hitch demonstrate how the *Ultimates* manipulate the media in order to control how they are perceived and to sell themselves to the American people to secure their ongoing funding. By actively engaging the reader in the creation of commentaries, Millar and Hitch require the reader to infer meaning in the physical structure and composition of the text. By creating mistrust for the media and media personnel, Millar and Hitch's *The Ultimates* assumes an engaged readership that will grasp their commentary about the role of the media in American society.

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