

# GEEK MYTHOLOGY: NOSTALGIA IN FOUR COLORS

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The cover of Marvel Comics' *The West Coast Avengers* #11 depicts Iron Man, an armored and helmeted superhero, locked in heated battle with Shockwave, an armored and helmeted supervillain. Both their arms are raised, the fingers of Iron Man's right hand intertwined with Shockwave's left hand in a power struggle to hold the other close. Iron Man's left hand is clenched into a fist about to hammer Shockwave's silver face shield, while Shockwave's right hand is extended in a karate chop formation about to strike Iron Man's back. In the middle distance, Hawkeye, a nebulous hero clad in a purple costume and armed with bow and arrow, and Mockingbird, an acrobatic ingénue armed with an extendable steel staff, are fending off Razorfist, who has large razors for hands, and Zaran, a self-proclaimed weapons master. In the background, a crowd of frightened onlookers recedes into the distance.

As an adolescent, this cover spoke to me in a way that it does not now. I had never purchased a comic book before, but something about the characters and their struggles prompted me to buy it, take it home, and devour its contents. I hold no emotional ties to the comic itself (the cover image and the story inside were long forgotten until rereading the issue very recently), except that it was the entry point for years of comic book collecting that eventually waned and died with the advent of adulthood and the speculator boom and crash of the mid-1990s. Since it is my contention that Marvel superhero comics were not only founded on nostalgia but are perpetuated by nostalgia, it is worth exploring the nostalgic devices Marvel uses to manipulate the comic book reader and how the reader is affected in the present and future.

Although the *West Coast Avengers* series was not considered the pinnacle of the Marvel canon, it is still not difficult to find its adherents. In his recent review on BoingBoing.net, Andy Ihnatko, a *Chicago Sun-Times* contributor, writes that "the first 42 or so issues of [The West Coast Avengers] was . . . 'A COMIC BOOK COMIC BOOK!'" and that it is the reason "why it's one of [his] favorite series ever." He goes on to explain:

I try so very hard not to turn into one of those old farts who claim that the comics they read when they were kids are universally better than today's comics. Time is fraudulently kind. We remember the stuff we really liked, and we forget the stuff that was mediocre and unmemorable.

However much he tries to resist, Ihnatko is nostalgic for the comics of his youth and longs for a return to that time. This longing, as Svetlana Boym writes in *The Future of Nostalgia*, lies in Ihnatko's "desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or

collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” (XV). He is not alone in this feeling. The comic book industry and its collectors are so rooted in nostalgia that they have created a collector culture to celebrate and venerate the past with conventions, fanzines, web sites, and price guides, building what Boym calls “a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world” (XIV), and all of which look back to regard the greatness of what once was and may never be again. Pertinent here are Boym’s two types of nostalgia: reflective nostalgia, which focuses on the longing for the missing time or object, and restorative nostalgia, which focuses on reconstructing the past in the present. The comic book collector, however, assumes both types, for he is both reflective—longing for the past, even if he has no direct memory of it—and restorative—using the present product as a means to gain access to the past, even if only a recycled version of it.

While Boym asserts that nostalgia is a “historical emotion” (XVI), Paul Grainge stresses in “Nostalgia and Style in Retro America” that it is a “cultural style, a consumable mode as much as it can be said to be an experienced mood” (27). This places what Boym interprets as a personal feeling in direct contrast to Grainge’s commercial, almost clinical, interpretation. Despite the dichotomy of their theories, both converge in their thinking of revisiting the past, but in wholly differing ways. What Boym calls restorative, Grainge calls recycling, but they are not as similar as they sound. Grainge’s idea of recycling is a “replaying and recontextualizing [of] reruns in programming formats aimed at particular demographic segments” (31) and becomes a sort of byproduct of Boym’s restorative nostalgia in that it brings the past into the present, albeit with a considerable difference: the recycled past is untainted and made available almost exactly as it was originally presented, while the restored past (e.g., the Sistine Chapel) is refurbished and represented as a “return ‘back to Michelangelo,’ to the original brightness of the frescoes” (Boym 45). Both elements, however, are relevant to Marvel Comics, a company that has been restoring and recycling its product since the early 1960s.

Indeed, Grainge might as well be referring directly to Marvel Comics when he says, “in commercial terms, [nostalgia] . . . can designate anything which has been culturally recycled and/or appeals to a market where pastness is a value . . . or use an idea of the past to position themselves within particular niche markets” (30), for there may be no better example of a niche market than the superhero comic book. This recycling of “pastness” has been in play since Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created the modern superhero comic book for Marvel Comics with *Fantastic Four* #1 in 1962, with one of its characters—The Human Torch—being revived from the 1930s, a period known as the Golden Age of comics (a nostalgic term if there ever was one), and another—Mr. Fantastic—being reminiscent in both power and appearance to Plastic Man, also a character from the Golden Age. Throughout the 1960s, Lee and Kirby recycled and popularized Captain America and his nemesis Red Skull from the Golden Age, and

created many new heroes, some of which held striking resemblances to past characters from long forgotten titles and others inspired by characters from Greek and Norse mythology. That this time, which has become known as the Silver Age, is held in such high esteem by collectors has not been lost on the editors, writers, and artists that came later. Even as they create new characters and stories, the original characters and stories remain the bedrock of the industry, so much so that Marvel Comics instituted a style known as the “Marvel method” where artists must adhere to the writing and artistic styles of Lee and Kirby, thus creating a product where the present maintains the appearance of the past. While the “Marvel method” might not be exactly what Grainge defines as recycling, it does reinforce Boym’s assertion that “nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective” (XVI), where, in this case, the past is being commodified and idealized in the mind of the present reader, for whom the Marvel style is being recycled and the Marvel characters are being restored.

So how do these nostalgic devices affect Marvel’s readers? After decades of being told of the greatness of the Golden and Silver Ages, the reader adopts what, in *Present Pasts*, Andreas Huyssen calls “imagined memories” (17), which create nostalgia for a time, place, or object that the witness has never directly experienced. But to the comic book reader, this nostalgia for the lost object brings with it a hope or belief that the present can be just as magical as the past that they have missed. By providing the aura of the past, which Boym defines as “a mist of nostalgia that does not allow for possession of the object of desire” (45), and “recontextualizing” its characters for “particular demographic segments” (Grainge 31), Marvel influences the reader’s emotions in such a way that keeps them hungry for Marvel product in the present and into the future. As long as Marvel Comics is recycling the same characters and story structures, the present replica brings with it a longing for the past while also acting as a signifier that today and tomorrow are, or can be, just as good as yesterday, and so the Golden Age can be restored.

But what comes with all of this recycling and restoration is the loss of progress, because to obsess over the past is to lose sight of the present. For example, in his book *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, Sean Howe claims that writer Steve Englehart “was fired from *The West Coast Avengers* (for refusing to include Iron Man in the title)” and that his editor “was instituting a ‘plan to end innovation across the line’” (314). In other words, nostalgia sells comic books, so stick with the characters (in this case Iron Man) that readers have been emotionally attached to for decades, and always choose formulaic tradition (that is, nostalgia) over artistic innovation (that is, progress), two concepts that are always at odds “like Jekyll and Hyde: alter egos” (Boym, XVI). So even if the publisher aims to move the Marvel line sideways instead of forward, it still appears to be moving to the consumer.

However, once progress is lost, the future is soon to follow. Huyssen tells us that we spend so much time reflecting on the past that we sacrifice our future. He says, “if all of the past can be made over, aren’t we just creating our own illusions of the past

while getting stuck in an ever-shrinking present?” (21). If the past has taught Marvel Comics anything, it is that comic books increase in value over time, specifically the first issues of a series, and that many collectors will purchase any title with a #1 on the cover, regardless of whether they have any intention of reading it. Using that knowledge in the early 1990s, Marvel Comics began looking at the future with an eye toward lining its pockets and expanding its present. Glutting the market with multiple versions of the first issue of a new series, each version containing the same story inside but with a different cover, Marvel was “underscor[ing] nostalgia’s fundamental insatiability” (Boym, XVII). Once again, they were selling the same familiar characters, but this time calling the comics ‘instant collectibles,’ while knowing that consumers would buy many copies of each version as an investment for the future. According to Howe, with the release of *X-Men* #1 on August 16, 1991, “every week a different cover was shipped to stores, building up to a fifth version, a \$3.95 bonanza with a foldout of the previous four covers” and “when the smoke cleared, nearly 8 million copies had been sold—roughly 17 copies for every regular comic book reader” (333). By doing so, Marvel was preying on the collector’s nostalgia for the characters of the past and present while also prompting them to speculate on the nostalgia of the future collector (from which they hoped to make a profit).

Although Marvel itself initially profited considerably from this speculator ambition, the company spent many years recovering from the consumer’s loss of respect, even filing for bankruptcy by the end of the 1990s. And so, while Marvel’s use of the past may have briefly extended its present, it did so in sacrifice of its future. Marvel’s failure was relying entirely on the past, a past that Boym tells us “has become much more unpredictable than the future” (XIV), as an indicator of present and future trends.

Throughout its history, collectors have been considered active participants in Marvel’s culture of nostalgia, commenting and reflecting on the storylines and receiving feedback from the creators and editors via letter columns and fanzines, but with Marvel’s recent forays into newer and/or more popular mediums, that status has been relegated to one of passivity, preventing collectors from fully engaging with the product as they once had. Specifically, over the last decade Marvel has been repackaging and selling its product through the film industry. The movies (e.g., *The Avengers*, *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, etc.), which recycle the same characters and tell the same stories that were originally told nearly fifty years ago, have been successful at the box office. While the stories may be new to some of the audience, the vast majority of ticket buyers have experienced them in various forms for years, even decades, and go to the theater with the expectation that the past can be reignited and made new again. Although the movie format brings with it a sense of progress, what the audience sees is familiar, and what is missing on the screen (and in the recycled comics) is the emotion and inspiration behind the original creations of their youth. Perhaps these feelings are the lost objects that they have been trying to regain all along. Although it

is the emotions that they long for, it is the commodified object that they continue to be given.

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