

4. The Superman/Kent hypothesis: On the epistemological limit between human and superhuman.

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Abstract

Everybody knows that Superman is Clark Kent. Nobody knows that Superman is Clark Kent.

Located between these two absolute statements is the epistemological limit that separates the superhero fictitious universe from our universe of causal reality. The superheroic double identity is a secret shared by the superhero and the reader of the comic or the viewer of the movie, and quite often the superhero winks at the outside world, thus breaking the 4th wall and establishing this collusive relationship. However, in our hypothesis, we are interested in Superman not as a fictitious archetype, but rather as a fictitious metaphor. We are not interested in his double identity as the matrix of superheroic attributes and narratives, but rather as the differential limit between superhuman and human within the fictional universe. Because, the reader or the viewer may share the secret identity with Superman and also with Spiderman or Batman or any other superhuman, but the secret equivalence of Superman and Clark Kent contains another hidden antithesis.

Keywords

Epistemology; Superman; Nostalgia; Ubermensch; Cognition

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Everybody knows that Superman is Clark Kent. Nobody knows that Superman is Clark Kent.

Located between these two absolute statements is the epistemological limit that separates the superhero fictitious universe from our universe of causal reality. We will investigate the transition from the human to the superhuman through the example of the Superman/Kent antithesis, in order to show that between the human condition and the beyond an epistemological barrier is located, represented in popular fiction by the glasses that conceal Superman's true identity from both the public and himself. Our hypothesis is that the glasses serve as a fictitious ontological adaptor, that echoes older philosophical attempts to project humanity to a superhuman scope, using the Nietzschean Overman as a prime example. As a contrast to the human/superhuman synthesis that is Superman/Clark Kent, we can use the human/beast synthesis that is presented in the Hulk/Bruce Banner figure of the rival Marvel fictitious universe. We will point out the human educational background of the hero as a social-historical environment were his human aspects were cultivated, that reminds us of the liberation educational function proposed in the writings of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Finally we will try to correlate the figure of Superman to a notion of collective *nostalgia* that emerges from the spreading and accumulation of information and significations on a global social scale through the mass media.

Every superheroic double identity is a secret shared by the superhero and the reader of the comic or the viewer of the movie, and quite often the superhero winks at the outside world, thus breaking the 4th wall and establishing this collusive relationship. The double identity formula became the dominant paradigm in superheroic fiction, since Superman soon became the archetypal superhero for more reasons than just being the first (created in 1933, first published appearance in 1938¹). Many essays have been written regarding the phenomenon of superheroes in popular fiction, which is often called a modern American mythology, although it is not a mythology, neither an abstraction of American culture, among which we should at least mention Umberto Eco and Natalie Clinton's '*The Myth of Superman*'². In the latter, the Italian professor considers Superman a semantic phenomenon, to which we can refer as a phenomenon connotative of the dominant imaginary significations of the broader western culture.

However, in our hypothesis, we are interested in Superman not as a fictitious *archetype*, but rather as a fictitious *metaphor*. We are not interested in his double identity as the matrix of superheroic properties and narratives, but rather as the differential limit between superhuman and

¹ *Action Comics* #1, June 1938.

² Umberto Eco and Natalie Chilton, *The Myth of Superman*, Diacritics, Vol. 2, No. 1, The John Hopkins University Press (Spring, 1972), pp. 14-22.



human *within* the fictional universe. Because, the reader or the viewer may share the secret identity with Superman and also with Spiderman or Batman or any other superhuman, but the secret equivalence of Superman and Clark Kent contains a more hidden antithesis. It has been pointed out by Jules Feiffer³ that Superman is the only superhero that actually disguises into a *human* being, since his real identity, as the last son of the dying planet Krypton, is the superhuman, Clark Kent being nothing more than a façade. His uniform is his heritage from his lost home world, and lately attempts have been made (for example in Christopher Nolan's 'Man of Steel') to incorporate even the S chest plate in Kryptonian culture and heritage. Nevertheless, this is just the surface.

More important is the fact that Superman's uniform doesn't cover his face or his hands, and in this Superman is also unique among superheroes, with the possible exception of Marvel's The Hulk. Let's assume that Superman is the prime or fundamental identity of the character and Clark Kent the secondary identity or the epiphenomenon. This assumption proves to be false, if we take into consideration the other elements of the Superman mythos, especially the fact that only his uniform and his powers connect him to his planet of origin by means of heredity, whereas he was raised and educated as Clark Kent. Both identities are actually equivalent, and for many reasons Superman's ethos, which is the core of his heroism, is a direct result of his upbringing, a result not of his origin but of his education and reflects the ethics of protestant America and liberal Enlightenment.

However, what is really interesting is not the equivalence of the two identities of the character, but the boundary between them, which is nothing more than a *pair of glasses*. This is the most essential difference between Superman and every other masked superhero. While every one of them goes in great lengths and devotes strenuous and anxious efforts to conceal their secret identities, this being a usual stress point of dramatization in their narratives, Superman shows neither anxiety, nor does he make any serious effort to conceal his own. Not because his own secrecy is not important. On the contrary, it is as important as anybody's and for the same reasons, the protection of his ignorant loved ones. Nevertheless, his frail and inadequate disguise proves adequate and impenetrable in his fictional universe, where nobody is perceptive enough to see through the glasses and recognize the similarities between Clark Kent and the most popular face in the world.

Put on the glasses – take off the glasses. With these simple moves, Superman and Clark Kent alternate identities, while at the same time remain so radically divided that even Lois Lane, the woman who has slept with both (essentially the same man in different role playing games) doesn't understand that they are the same person. If we consider Superman a metaphor, the thickening point of significance is located exactly there, on the glasses as an ontological and epistemological limit. Since it is not only Lane's cognitive function that differentiates beyond that limit, but also the superhero's attributes themselves. Clark Kent, the subject in the condition of bespectacled, behaves like a jittery little man and short of *is* a jittery little man, whereas Superman, the subject in a 'pure' condition, the subject-in-and-by-himself, is beyond the ontological sphere of humanity, in-between,

³ Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (New York: The Dial Press, 1965) p.19



human and God. The aforementioned Hulk, on the other side, is in-between human and beast, and it is obvious that both characters (from different publishers) find themselves out of society, the former being a messiah, the latter a monster, the one above societal structures, the other beneath them, as regards their superhuman identity. As regards their human alter-egos, they are both high in the social ladder, Clark Kent as an acknowledged journalist and Bruce Banner (Hulk's human counterpart) a renowned scientist. One last important difference between the two characters, to close this parenthesis, is that Superman is born a demigod, while the Hulk is the outcome of a tragic accident, a result of his own human arrogance and ignorance.

Kent's pair of glasses, the distortion or correction lens/mirror, is, in Superman's fictional universe, the ontological and epistemological boundary between human and superhuman, empirical and transcendental. It is a metaphysical limit. But, since it is substantially transparent, since it is actually a lens/mirror, it is also penetrable. It is also a metaphysical connection, an ontological transformer or adaptor. Since the glasses become the ontological adaptor, semblance and substance interconnect and since the glasses are part of the semblance, the disguise, then semblance becomes an essential attribute of substance. But if we think of the aforementioned equivalence of the two identities of the character, then semblance and substance are evenly equivalent or semblance is reduced to the exact point/field of transformation between two distinct substances. The Judeo-Christian theological elements of Superman's character seem to point towards the second solution, which also implies a latent triadic background pattern, if we add the character of the absent father Jor-El (the actual father of Superman, lost in the destruction of their home planet Krypton, but constantly reappearing in the form of a ghost, a spirit or a memory, who refers to another latent identity incarnation, that of Kal-El, the Kryptonian individual that Superman never became).

The objective perceptual appearance of Superman depends on the preferential structural conjunction of the variable elements of his mythos. But his subjective self-image is also transformed according to his selected image. Clark Kent not only appears as, but is a little man and Superman not only appears as, but is a demigod. Even the deepest sentimental unity of the subject is divided into two, communicating but distinct psychic poles, the human and the superhuman that have, at times, conflicted emotions. In many stories we see Clark Kent desperately in love with Lois Lane, while at the same time his Superman alter-ego remains condescendingly distant. So, in this case, the behavior of the subject, even his inner psychic responses, is every time attuned to his perceptual appearance to other human observers. So, the glasses prove to be more of an ontological adaptor than a disguise, which transfers the hero from the world of the one alter-ego to the universe of the other, depending on the reactions of his social-historical surroundings. It seems that the glasses are both a symbol of social belonging and a grid of ontological attributions.

Glasses are not a symbol of weakness but a symbol of short-sightedness. As a symbol of incomplete knowledge and a limited perceptual horizon, they designate and define the human side of the character, in deep contrast to the cognitive completeness and the infinite perceptivity of the superhuman.



The hidden irony of this analogy lies in the fact that the superhuman dimension is revealed only by the removal of the lens/mirror, the glasses or the semblance surface. But it is exactly that surface, that lens/mirror that is both the ontological catalyst of the transformation and the boundary that divides and connects the two distinct ontological realms. The removal of the glasses not only opens the door to the superhuman, but it is in itself a *superhuman action*. The glasses that symbolize human short-sightedness also symbolize the human condition. The removal of the glasses is a *platonian* act of transition towards a meta-historical and metaphysical dimension, a dimension that nevertheless is *not human*, a dimension that we can refer to in an imaginary manner but where we do not belong. It is an ascending to the super-reality, the metaphysical realm, which reminds us of the ascending of the thinker outside the cave towards the daylight of the true sun that Plato described in the famous allegory of the Cave⁴. However, we should note that while Plato's transition is a gradual one, the transition between Kent and Superman is instant and sharp. The one who removes the glasses is no longer Clark Kent, but *already* Kal-El, Superman in-himself. Therefore the distance between Superman and humanity equals the distance between Superman and his alter-ego, Clark Kent. In this aspect, Superman approximates the Nietzschean concept of the *Übermensch*, but is not limited to this. In *"Thus Spoke Zarathustra"*, Nietzsche declares the coming of the Overman as the overcoming of humanity:

"I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?"

All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment.

And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now, too man is more ape than any ape.[...]

Behold, I teach you the overman! The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so let them go!"⁵

It is clear that this overcoming of humanity is accompanied by the downgrading of humanity to the level of the ape. Moreover, it seems that the claims of human superiority are attributed to the overman, who is presented as more human than humans. It is so, since the overman is presented as the hope of the earth, leaving no place in the earth for lesser humans. In contrast to this vision, Superman is placed beyond humanity by asserting superhuman properties, and as such is a figure of

⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, 514a-520a.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, [1883], trans. Walter Kaufmann in *The portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), Prologue §3.

up-graded being without downgrading the others, more godlike than over-human. He points towards the heavens, he is a being of beyond, and as such, he is, in himself, an 'otherworldly hope'. In this godlike aspect, he constitutes an inspiration, but never a future.

This vision of the 'overman' is also an indictment against the crisis of western civilization, a declaration of both transgression and escape from a hollow destiny, such as was the destiny of humanity from a Nietzschean pessimistic perspective. However, Superman is not raised from the ground, but falls from the sky, is not raised above humanity, is raised *by* humans, not to overcome humanity, but to protect it. The only cases in the comics where Superman behaves like an Overman, are stories where he becomes a dictator and a threat for humanity, as, for example, was presented recently in Mark Millar's "*Red Son*"⁶. In such stories Superman is eventually overthrown by his own guilt, these cases of course being exceptions of the norm located in alternate realities or universes, more like a dark reflection of the actual hero.

We could probably locate another analogy ascending from the individual to the social level. If we take Clark Kent, not Superman, as a metaphor, we could perceive the glasses, the lens/mirror, as a symbol of social short-sightedness and of the closeness of social significances, the ideological distortion. From the point of view of the others the glasses are also a vindication supplement that hides the real identity of the hero, establishing him as a public icon and a collective figure. We could perceive the lens/mirror as the symbol of the propaganda surface that every dominant power projects in order to become familiar. It is the lens/mirror that makes Clark Kent appear harmless, while hiding within himself the power of the sun. If we confront the superhero, then the glasses are an ideological canard to conceal the horror of infinite power. If we place ourselves in his position, then the glasses become the ideological veil that obscures the sight of reality as it is.

In our hypothesis, the glasses are a symbol of self-referential speculative thought and also a limit that conceals the real creative power of society in favor of structural reproduction. The glasses as an ideological lens/mirror are the social chains that bind Clark Kent to social mediocrity and conformity. Their removal seems the necessary step for him to confront reality without conventions, like a free individual.

Now the ontological transformation becomes sociological and the superhuman is presented in its utopian dimension, as a possible future. In this dimension the removal of the glasses is no longer a superhuman, thus humanely impossible, action, but a collective movement. In that sense, the liberal and enlightenment elements of the Superman mythos are the ones that constitute his power as *useful to the freedom of others*. Here the education and the ethos of the character are reflected, which are also his most humane attribute. The glasses here symbolize the dominant stereotypes and prejudices that must be removed in order for the values of solidarity and humanism, which define the heroic element of Superman, to emerge. And here Superman approximates the ideal of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, who stressed the importance of education in the development of a free, responsible and

⁶ Mark Millar, *Red Son* (New York: Titan Books, DC comics, 2004).



rational personality, against the corruption of society, in his famous treatise called “*Emile or On Education*”.

However, the semantic connotations of Superman extend further. The glasses are not only the epistemological and ontological boundary, but also the socio-historical and topological limit between the two distinct regions where each persona belongs, namely the extraterrestrial region of Krypton, which belongs to the inescapable past (inescapable in the sense that in every differential fictional timeline of the Superman mythos Krypton is inevitably destroyed, since that destruction is the sine qua non of the hero’s existence) and the terrestrial region of Metropolis, placed in the expanded present. The superhuman persona is rooted in the mythical past but is manifested and presented only in the Metropolis of the present, since the presence of the earth sun is what activates the latent Kryptonian superpowers. There is a strong imaginary attraction on both sides, with Krypton in the position of the imaginary mother-land, where the glasses are transformed to a symbol of exile and a limit of nostalgia.

Maybe this aspect of the Superman mythos allows us to shed some light on the dark sentimental locus in-between the great categorical dimensions of Memory and Sense, which resembles semi-conscious coherence. We will call this sentimental region *nostalgia*, a compound word of Greek origin that is analyzed as *nostos*, which means ‘returning home’ and *algos*, which means ‘pain’. Therefore, in its original sense the word meant the pain caused by the distance from the homeland, the birthplace, but also the pain caused by the attraction that this place, however far, still exercises to the soul. The imaginary birthplace, Krypton in our hypothesis, functions as the locus of the libido, thus creating a subconscious region for oppressed lust and desires, which not only formulates the construction of self-identity (dual in our case), but also regulates the intentions and sentiments of the *nostalgic* person.

Moving outside of his fictional universe and examining Superman as a social icon, we will inevitably see that he is beyond human, but always bound by the human perception of beyond. Within the socio-historical temporality that is the ontological environment of humanity, dominant images and icons function as representations of the tension between time and duration and incarnations of broader imaginary significances which correspond and interact with actual sentiments, intentions and actions. When we refer to nostalgia, this can be a personal feeling, even a sexual one. However, when we refer to nostalgia as a sentimental attribute of an imaginary icon, Superman in our case, then this corresponds also to the social sense of nostalgia, the nostalgia for a mythical, yet reassuring collective past or a utopian, yet peaceful collective future. In our time, amidst and after the tragedies of the 20th century, when past has become contractual and the future dystopian, the invention of the superhero offered a locus for collective nostalgia that is neither before nor after, but beyond.

It is interesting to note that these loci where in the past under the jurisdiction of official institutions, like education or state propaganda. Enough has been written about the role of

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, [1762], trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979).



educational institutions in reproducing the dominant authorities and projecting social consciousness to patterns of *national nostalgia*. Nevertheless, the jurisdiction and monopoly of such institutions has been replaced by a multitude of communication and education means, the spreading of information being instant and worldwide. Along with the internet new forms of social identification and community belonging have emerged, that exceed geographical or national restrictions. In this era of digital information and self representation a new form of nostalgia has also emerged, which appears globally and can be compared to Superman's nostalgia for Krypton. We should note, that besides the fact that he first appeared in a comic magazine, Superman's worldwide fame is mostly due to the adoptions of the character for the new mass media, radio at first, then television and finally, film. These media were those that renewed and revived Superman's icon whenever public interest seemed to wither. Even his temporary comic-book death acquired the status of a semi-historical fact only after great news networks decided to announce it worldwide.

We will call this type of social nostalgia that transverses historical past or future and aims at the infinity beyond, *cinematic nostalgia*. It is the nostalgia for things that the subject has never or will never experience, but that have rather been presented to her or him. The distinctive characteristic of this type of nostalgia is its polarized duality, constituted by the fact that on the one hand, it is a personal feeling whereas, on the other it refers to the collective sentiment and is projected on the social. In the case of cinematic nostalgia, the connection between individual and society is presented as direct and requisite and, most important, its object of desire, its scope and aspiration, is strictly perceptual and never institutional, strictly a utopia and never an expectation. It is the aspiration towards Superman, towards the beyond that resembles the lust for eternity. In that sense, the theological elements of the superhero emerge in the archetypical form of a promise that categorically excludes its realization.

To sum up, we will notice that Superman functions as a metaphor for this kind of cinematic nostalgia while at the same time reflecting the distorted realities of his reader or viewer on the transparent and transformative surface of his glasses. It was the inspiration of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the co-creators of Superman that transformed the Nietzschean *Übermensch* into a narrative of our collective dreams. It was the insertion of liberal elements of the enlightenment that allowed this figure that combines Rousseau and Nietzsche in a character of tremendous force that never becomes threatening. A character who reminds us that a vast, unexplored universe lies behind our dusty glasses. As such he is a social antidote against a socio-historical present reality that resists our dreams and desires.

Unfortunately, that is the most fundamental attribute of reality. A perseverance to resist.

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