

Daniel Stein, Abstract Narrating Crime in Superhero Comics

When superheroes like Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America began to populate the pages of US-American comic books in the late 1930s and early 1940s, they appeared as costumed crime-fighters who used their fantastic powers to battle urban crime and corruption. Superheroes came to act not merely as extralegal extensions of the institutionally authorized but ineffective police, but as social justice warriors bound by an ethical code that placed them above the laws of the land but not above the need for moral accountability. This talk argues that superhero comics participate in ongoing discursive and aesthetic constructions of crime by addressing questions of legitimacy concerning the means of prevention and methods of persecution, of criminality and its causes and effects, and of social, political, and economic justice as quintessential elements of the hero's crime-fighting agenda. As popular serial narratives, they do so through an inherently interactive storytelling apparatus that mobilizes authorization conflicts on the level of story (Who is authorized to identify crime and the appropriate means of fighting it?), of form (How do the serial format and the transmedial sprawl of the superhero impact the depiction of crime?) and of reception (How are crime and justice discussed by the comics' recipients?).