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Smith, AN

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Chapter 5

History Left Unsaid: *Implied Continuity* in Batman's Contemporary Comic-Book Narratives

Anthony N. Smith

In 2011, DC comics significantly revamped its large line of comic books, resetting the issue numbering of long-enduring superhero titles and streamlining the narrative continuity – the inter-connected backstory – that the characters had accumulated and shared over decades.¹ The new line – dubbed ‘The New 52’ – was intended in part to attract new readers to the DC universe.² As the company’s Co-Publisher (and fan-favourite artist) Jim Lee explained, the line’s high issue numbers (*Detective Comics* had reached #881 prior to the reset) and complicated character biographies ‘made the world of comic books a little more daunting to jump into’. The changes, the company hoped, would enable ‘new readers’ to ‘jump in and understand what’s going on from the very first issue’.³ The Batman backstory, however, was exempted from the simplification process that DC’s wider narrative universe underwent.⁴ As Batman writer Scott Snyder stressed shortly after the comic-book line reboot, in contrast to the likes of Superman, many of the significant events that the Caped Crusader had experienced within the prior universe would remain part of DC’s newly-created continuity. But Snyder, who took charge of the *Batman* title as part of The New 52 launch, nevertheless ensured that his storytelling approach complemented DC’s aim of appealing to new audiences. With the relaunched title, he elected to avoid obvious references to recent and significant storyworld incidents – such as Bruce Wayne’s

death/resurrection – so that ‘new fans’ would not ‘trip over’ such potentially confusing material.⁵

While being careful not to confuse an intended new readership, however, Snyder – together with illustrator Greg Capullo – nevertheless adopted storytelling techniques that emphasised to existing readers the narrative links between his *Batman* story arcs and Batman-related comic-book narrative published prior to the reboot. A large panel occupying the second and third pages of *Batman* #1 (2011), for example, depicts a host of menacing villains lined up to confront the book’s titular hero within Arkham Asylum. This host includes various staple characters – such as Two-Face, Scarecrow and Killer Croc – that will likely register with new readers familiar with Batman’s incarnations in film, television and video games. Yet standing shoulder to shoulder with these enduring villains is the relatively obscure figure of Professor Pyg, a deranged, snout-faced adversary specific to DC’s comic-book continuity prior to the New 52 reboot, having been introduced by the writer Grant Morrison two years previously.⁶ Another less renowned villain, also specific to pre-New 52 continuity, appears within a subsequent sequence in which Batman trades blows with foes at the asylum. A small panel within this sequence depicts the serial killer James Gordon Jr., whom Snyder previously introduced as part of his *Detective Comics* run in the previous year; the murderer lies on his cell bunk reading, apparently unperturbed by the brawl outside his door.⁷ Pyg and Gordon have seemingly little narrative import to the sequence: neither is attributed dialogue; neither is identified via caption. Their minor appearances in the opening scene are unlikely therefore to ‘trip up’ new readers, since many faces familiar to first-time readers have more prominence. Yet the pairs’ presence in the sequence sends a message to loyal readers who typically derive pleasure from the persistence and expansion of narrative continuity, subtly reassuring

them that these particular characters, and by implication the narrative events in which they participated, will remain part of Batman's fictional chronology despite DC's reboot.

The above is just one example from a range of narrative techniques upon which the contemporary comic book industry relies to service a loyal, dedicated readership while simultaneously addressing a potential wider audience. Using contemporary Batman narrative as a case study, this chapter analyses this comic-book storytelling strategy, linking its emergence to significant industrial shifts that have occurred since the mid-1990s. The increased pressure on publishers to attract a wider readership while also retaining the core readership has required rethinking continuity: writers still reference the Caped Crusader's complex and extended backstory but use techniques far subtler than those deployed prior to the emphasis on new readers. By implying Batman continuity as opposed to explicitly flagging it up, writers appease a core audience of dedicated readers while not confusing and/or irritating a broader audience unfamiliar with the minutiae of Batman's biography. In identifying and accounting for this change in storytelling techniques, this chapter augments scholarship concerned with the connections between narrative practices and industrial contexts in the US comic book industry. Scholars have explained how the comic-book marketplace in the 1980s and 1990s brought about an intensification of continuity and serial narrative practices in superhero storytelling; this chapter expands upon this work by illustrating how these practices altered as marketplace conditions once more transformed.⁸ The chapter first outlines the industrial changes that have motivated the shift towards techniques of what I refer to as *implied continuity*, that is writers' referencing of an overarching storyworld in ways that satisfy dedicated readers without baffling new and/or casual readers ignorant of prior events.⁹ The chapter then

moves on to explore this storytelling mode in more detail through textual analysis of specific Batman narratives.

Continuity in context

Prior to the 1960s, superhero comic-book series did little to suggest that the storyline of an individual issue contributed to a wider unified fictional history – that is, a narrative continuity. As Umberto Eco (writing in 1962) suggested of the *Superman* series, each of its issues' storylines represents 'a virtual beginning, ignoring where the preceding event left off. ...The very structure of time falls apart [as a consequence of this narrative mode]... that is, the notion of time that ties one episode to another.'¹⁰ Certain historical factors contributed to the absence of narrative continuity within superhero comic books during this industrial phase. Most significantly, because children/adolescents represented the primary target audience in this period, the market experienced a general customer turnover every three years.¹¹ This constant change of readership provided little incentive for editors to ensure narrative connections to prior storylines with which its fast-changing audience would likely be unfamiliar. In addition, due to the perception of comic books as disposable entertainment, there was an absence of back issues within reading cultures, meaning there was also little available prior narrative within circulation to which readers might refer.¹² Superman did not recall events that had (at least in terms of publication) occurred years earlier for the simple reason that his readers could not recall events of which they were ignorant.

In the 1960s, however, an important transition in audience activity induced an editorial turn towards narrative continuity techniques. Whereas comic books had previously been regarded as ephemeral artefacts to be discarded, traded or just handed

around from friend to friend, the decade saw the origin of a niche of dedicated readers seeking to collect and preserve back issues.¹³ This trend was due in part to the emergence of an audience of older comic-book consumers wanting to celebrate their favourite books from earlier decades.¹⁴ To appeal to the segment of comic-book readership that had begun to accumulate and revisit its own collection of comic-book experiences, publishers – particularly Marvel, but to a lesser extent DC also – began to forge an explicit and consistent memory within fictional universes during this period. Narratives began to regularly and explicitly reference events in other series and from earlier storylines, suggesting that a publisher’s collection of superhero titles operated as a single, coherent storyworld.¹⁵

A significant industrial shift in the following decade linked to the preferences and activities of this highly dedicated readership would prove key to an intensification of narrative continuity practices. The continued growth of comic book collecting, combined with a simultaneous decline in newsstand sales (via which comic books had traditionally been marketed), influenced publishers in the late-1970s to shift towards the direct market method of distribution. Speciality comic shops, opened by dedicated comic-book readers to meet the growing demand for back issues, began to replace traditional retail outlets as the primary venue for new comic books.¹⁶ By the late-1980s, most comic books were being sold through speciality comic book stores, leading publishers to prioritise narrative modes appropriate for the highly concentrated group of dedicated readers that have typically comprised the consumer base of this retail channel.¹⁷

Such modes include the implementation of long-running serialised storylines that journey through many issues and between multiple different series and that require readers to purchase many comics to consume the entire narrative. One

example of this would be the Batman ‘Knightfall’ saga (1993-1994), which spans more than 60 issues published across a number of different Batman-related series. But narratives from this period also typically emphasise narrative continuity within long-running series and between different series (outside of the auspices of distinct serialised story arcs), which speaks to the importance that the direct market readership has typically placed on the establishing of storylines within a wider fictional framework. As Matthew J. Pustz observes, narrative continuity is central to this audiences’ engagement with superhero comic-books: ‘Information based on continuity becomes the source of discussion, jokes and arguments, making it the raw material for the interactive glue that holds comic-book culture together.’¹⁸

Reflecting a context in which publishers regarded these dedicated consumers as their primary readership, the evoking of continuity within comic-book narratives – a chief source of pleasure for these readers – is not only frequent but also highly explicit. This is the case, for example, in the single-issue storyline ‘Transition’, from *New Titans* #55 (1989), which functions as an amplification to *Batman* #428 (1988), in which DC’s second Robin, Jason Todd, is killed. As part of the *New Titans* storyline, Dick Grayson, the first Robin, learns of Jason’s death. The angst-ridden Dick visits Bruce Wayne (Batman), and the pair row, each betraying their guilt about Jason’s demise and making myriad unambiguous references to significant incidents within their shared history.¹⁹ A further example occurs within *Batman* #494 (1993) subsequent to Batman rescuing Commissioner Gordon from the killer Cornelius Stirk. As Batman explains to Gordon’s wife that her ‘husband was the target’, an angry Sarah Essen-Gordon retorts, ‘Just as he was in the Headhunter incident – when I told you to *leave us alone*’, thus drawing a parallel between the issue and a prior storyline in which the assassin Headhunter targeted the commissioner.²⁰ Each of these

examples foregrounds narrative continuity via character dialogue that clearly cites specific incidents from previously published storylines; this storytelling technique unequivocally addresses the requirements of a readership that favours an emphasis on narrative continuity.

However, another significant industrial transition in the 1990s – in the form of a rapid decline of the direct market audience – ultimately curtailed publishers’ prioritisation of their highly dedicated readership; as a consequence writers and illustrators have recalibrated their approaches to the evocation of narrative continuity. Strategies foregrounding continuity had enabled publishers to nurture and engage an isolated niche of highly committed consumers who purchased multiple comic books a week on a consistent basis. But the danger of an overriding dependence on this ‘precariously narrow’ consumer base was exposed, notes Bradford W. Wright, in the mid-1990s.²¹ The direct market system had enabled year-on-year increases in sales through the 1980s and early 1990s, leading industry sales to reach \$1 billion in 1993, but – due to the collapse of an artificially inflated collector/speculator market – revenues had declined to \$450m by 1996.²²

By the beginning of the 21st Century, the industry – chiefly in the form of its two leading publishers, Marvel and DC – had realised that to survive they must appeal to an audience beyond the contracted direct market. Publishers therefore sought to better address new readers generally, but they also more specifically looked to court a more *casual* consumer type; that is, the type of consumer that might be open to reading comic-books, but who doesn’t relish the prospect of going to specialist stores once a week to purchase a wide range of titles. In the hopes of luring these potential readers, publishers began to develop alternate formats and distribution channels.

In the first instance, publishers sought to maximise the commercial possibilities of the collected edition (a graphic-novel format that compiles previously-published comic-book issues).²³ DC, in particular, had already helped to form a nascent graphic novel market in the 1980s and 1990s through its reformatting of select adult-oriented material as graphic novels, including *Watchmen* (1987), *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and various titles published under the company's edgy Vertigo imprint. By marketing such content through mass-market bookstores, publishers had by the end of the century established a new retail conduit capable of reaching consumers outside of direct market culture.²⁴ However, by 2001, the graphic novel market's revenues (\$43 million via comic shops, \$32 million via mass-market) were still dwarfed by direct-market periodical sales.²⁵ But, since publishers regarded the collected edition format as the ideal product to address new and/or casual consumers, they began to greatly increase the production and distribution of collected edition titles via both direct market and mass-market channels (such as Amazon and Barnes & Noble).²⁶ By 2013, annual North American sales of graphic novels had massively expanded (\$170 million via comic shops, \$245 million via mass-market), easily exceeding those of print periodical comic books (\$345 million).²⁷

Having developed one market sector better suited to a wider audience of new and/or casual consumers, publishers have more recently moved to rapidly grow another – the digital comics market. Publishers distribute monthly comic-book issues (primarily intended for print) in digital form via online platforms such as Comixology and Marvel Unlimited. The format and its distribution mode therefore enables a new and/or casual readership to conveniently consume such content via tablets, computers and smartphones, and avoid the more intensive consumption practices of direct market culture. Publishers have focused resources on digitally reproducing back

issues, releasing digital versions of their collected editions and ensuring that the digital version of any new issue is published simultaneously with its print incarnation. The digital market has grown rapidly, with North American revenues escalating from a mere estimated \$1 million in 2009 to \$70 million in 2013.²⁸ As the publishers intended, the format has proved especially attractive to new and casual readers.²⁹

Parallel to the developing of formats and distribution channels better suited to new and/or casual readers, publishers have also reconfigured their narratives for this intended audience. While the foregrounding of complicated storyworld continuity in 1990s superhero comics helped cultivate dedicated, high-spending consumers, as Pustz observes, the high impenetrability of these narratives proved a barrier of entry to a wider group of readers.³⁰ The narrative practice of implied continuity has therefore evolved in order to simultaneously appeal to not only dedicated readers, but new and/or casual consumers also. The separate issues of a distinct story arc continue to foreground serial connections that bind the instalments together, but explicit referencing of a wider narrative continuity is often reduced. New readers can begin following a new story arc without the requirement of extensive knowledge of storyworld material published previously or simultaneously (in separate but related series). This approach to narrative coherence also permits casual readers to easily consume a story arc as a single discrete text following its reformatting as a collected edition. At the same time, however, implied continuity unobtrusively connects new story arcs to the larger structure of the overarching storyworld. In this manner implied continuity addresses new and/or casual readers desire for coherent narratives not dependent upon readers' prior knowledge while also catering for dedicated readers' preferences for a complex narrative continuity that references the wider storyworld. Both new/casual readers and dedicated readers must still purchase all the instalments

of a particular story arc, either individually or together as part of a collected edition, but while the former can delight in the serial pleasures of that arc's narrative enigma and resolution, the latter can also relish the arc's implied connections to the broader fictional universe with which they are familiar.

Snyder and Capullo's 'Death of the Family' story arc (*Batman* #13-17, 2012-2013), which concerns the Joker's campaign against Batman's allies, is one example of this strategy of dual appeal. Together, its five issues operate explicitly as a serial storyline – with a given issue's causal chain of events directly leading to the next (via such devices as cliffhangers at issue ends). In line with DC's audience-targeting strategies, Snyder has ensured that the story arc, which has since been published as a single collected edition in both print and digital formats, does not obviously rely on wider continuity and functions as a discrete narrative. As he stressed while promoting the story arc's first issue, 'I don't want you to feel that you have to read anything else to understand what's happening within' his *Batman* run. 'I would never write a story that's dependent on another story', he added.³¹ The story-arc is therefore very well suited to the requirements of a new and/or casual readership. But, as this chapter's following case study sections go on to demonstrate, while this story arc forgoes the storytelling practice characteristic of the late-1980s/1990s of overtly referencing events published previously, it nevertheless acknowledges a wider narrative framework via techniques of implied continuity. Such techniques neither threaten the apparent narrative independence of the story arc nor alert new and/or casual consumers to their ignorance of prior events, yet they address dedicated readers familiar with those events, rewarding them for their investment of time and money.

The following two sections explore in detail the range of implied continuity techniques that practitioners have adopted to suit the requirements of the

contemporary comic book industry. Using recent Batman comic-book story arcs as case study material, these sections focus in particular on the works of the two writers who have dominated creative control over Batman-related comic book titles in recent years; namely, Grant Morrison and Scott Snyder.³² The first section focuses on the distinct ways in which these writers utilise the storyworld ingredients of props, settings and character dialogue to discreetly establish connections between their story arcs and earlier storylines along what Robert C. Allen refers to as a ‘syntagmatic’ axis of the narrative.³³ This means that, in such cases, the connective tissue between these writers’ contemporary Batman narratives and storylines published years previously form a single chronological sequence of fictional events – that is, the seriality of the overarching storyworld rather than that of a discrete narrative arc within the storyworld. The second section, by contrast, demonstrates how these writers in addition subtly imply narrative continuity across what Allen refers to as the ‘paradigmatic’ narrative axis, wherein associations between distinct storylines are not tied to a chronology of depicted events, but are instead dependent on an inferred thematic parallelism.³⁴

Implied syntagmatic connectivity in Batman continuity

Storytellers across media are able to imply – as opposed to explicitly punch up – syntagmatic continuity through the use of evocative storyworld settings. As Karen Lury observes of soap opera, for example, recurrent storyworld locations ‘can, for the long-term viewer, become imbued with a series of visually inspired memories of different characters and plot lines’, emphasising the continuity that these storyworld components share.³⁵ Morrison – together with illustrator Frank Quitely – relies on the resonating power of storyworld settings in the maiden story arc of his *Batman &*

Robin run, weakly linking it to the characters' history by setting it in a location significant to Batman mythology. In 'Batman Reborn' (#1-3, 2009), the Caped Crusader battles the aforementioned Professor Pyg, who is holed up at a dilapidated amusement park. This arc represents Pyg's first appearance in DC narrative and also Dick Grayson's first outing under the Bat cowl (after having replaced a temporarily deceased Bruce Wayne). But contrasting with the newness of both this Batman and his opponent, the amusement park setting is resurrected from the 1988 original graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke*. In this earlier narrative, by Alan Moore (writer) and Brian Bolland (illustrator), the Joker acquires an amusement park, subsequently utilising its ghost train as part of his elaborate torture of Commissioner Gordon. The events of 'Batman Reborn' bear little obvious relation to those of *The Killing Joke* but Morrison and Quitely's choice of setting suggests that the two storylines are linked by a vast chronology of events that separate them. Quitely's depictions of the amusement park environment, which are sometimes almost identical to those of *The Killing Joke* (his near recreation of Bolland's ghost train signage being a case in point) strongly emphasise this link for those readers familiar with both narratives.

'Batman Reborn's final issue (#3) further evokes the implied connection with *The Killing Joke*. Subsequent to Batman and Robin defeating Pyg and his menacing circus troupe, Commissioner Gordon oversees the police round up of Pyg's henchmen at the amusement park. In a dialogue exchange with Batman, Gordon mutters in an aside, 'I hate this place', referring to his earlier ordeal. This oblique nod to continuity sits in stark contrast to the explicit referencing to prior narrative typically found within character dialogue in the late-1980s/1990s (such as Sarah Essen-Gordon's citation of the Headhunter incident). For the new and/or casual reader unfamiliar with

Gordon's biography, the commissioner's unremarked upon comment might be slightly baffling, but it is unlikely to raise awareness of their own ignorance of prior storyworld material; for the dedicated consumer, Gordon's comment accentuates the continuity shared between the more recent story arc and *The Killing Joke*. *Batman & Robin*'s subtle allusion to Moore and Bolland's earlier narrative through the use of environmental backdrop and brief, elliptical dialogue reflects Morrison's philosophies regarding continuity, which he suggests should merely operate as 'background window dressing' within a story that will not turn off newcomers.³⁶

Similar to Morrison's 'Batman Reborn', Snyder's 'Death of the Family' story arc also subtly signals its connection to a famous Batman comic-book narrative published in the 1980s; in this case, the earlier story is 'A Death in the Family' (*Batman* #426-429, 1988-1989), which the title of Snyder's story arc clearly pays homage to. Rather than use an evocative location to suggest this continuity, however, 'Death of the Family' instead relies on a distinctive prop. Snyder's story arc concerns the Joker's plot to kill the Dark Knight's 'family' of close associates – Alfred, Robin, Nightwing, Batgirl, Red Hood, Red Robin and Commissioner Gordon. In issue #16, Batman goes to confront the Joker at Arkham Asylum, which the Clown Prince of Crime has taken over. Within the asylum's walls, the hero is met by a bizarre piece of Joker handiwork suspended from a ceiling: a macabre makeshift canvas comprised of many still-breathing humans. Upon the canvas, a collection of various scenes involving Batman and the Joker has been painted (Joker: 'The live flesh makes the colors pop, no?'). The scenes include Batman carrying a limp Robin, the Joker carrying a small child and the Joker kicking a bound Batman.

The Joker implies that this exhibit – 'a royal tapestry', as he refers to it – chronicles prior conflicts between the two. As a sequence of panels provides close ups

of the illustrations upon the canvas, the Joker remarks, 'It's like yesterday isn't it? Our adventures! The times we've had! The laughter!' The new and/or casual reader, unfamiliar with Batman comic-book narratives published decades previously, is able to interpret the canvas' juxtaposed scenes the way the Joker's dialogue seems to intend; that is, as a totality of shared moments – 'the times we've had'. Yet, while the fact is unlikely to concern new and/or casual readers, the scenes depicted on the canvas can also each be interpreted as symbolising a specific moment within Batman continuity. They therefore prompt dedicated readers to consider the relationship between each depicted scene and the 'Death of the Family' story arc. For dedicated readers, the scene of Batman carrying Robin will likely carry particular resonance as it evokes the earlier 'A Death in the Family' story arc; the cover art for the graphic novel version of 'A Death in the Family' features a similar image of Batman holding a limp Robin in his arms. In this earlier story arc, the Joker captures and murders the second Robin, Jason Todd. The elaborate prop's evocation of 'A Death in the Family' thus subtly reminds dedicated readers of a precursor event that relates strongly to the Joker's efforts to kill Batman's associates in Snyder's story arc.

Similar to Morrison with 'Batman Reborn', Snyder also uses a highly furtive reference via character dialogue to reaffirm the connections between 'A Death in the Family' and his own story arc. In *Batman #17* (2013), the Joker holds court with his captives, Nightwing, Batgirl, Red Robin and Red Hood (the current guise of Jason Todd), espousing his thesis as to why he has been able to capture Batman's allies. 'You want to know... why I get to creep in... [*speaking directly to Red Robin*] to get you, [*to Robin*] and you, [*to Red Hood*] and you (again), [*to Nightwing*] and you, [*to Batgirl*] and you?' By having Joker briefly and vaguely signal (via the 'again') that he

has been able to capture Todd previously, Snyder further hints at the key incident of ‘A Death in the Family’.

In the examples discussed so far, the connections that writers establish between new story arcs and storyworld material produced decades previously are clearly syntagmatic, forming chronological sequences of related fictional events in a chain of cause and effect. Commissioner Gordon’s display of antipathy towards Gotham’s condemned fairground is subsequent to and a consequence of his prior suffering there. The Joker’s knowing referencing of ‘A Death in the Family’ is contingent upon his own integral involvement in this earlier story arc. But, as the following section explores, contemporary writers in addition subtly convey narrative continuity across a paradigmatic narrative axis by implying thematic associations between distinct storylines.

Implied paradigmatic connectivity in Batman continuity

In another chapter in this volume, Jim Collins observes that the ‘distinguishing feature of recent popular narrative’ is ‘its increasing hyperconsciousness about... the history of popular culture’, leading to ‘popular texts construct[ing] quite elaborate intertextual arenas’. Analysing Warner Bros.’ 1989 *Batman* film, Collins notes that while its plot – concerning the hero’s conflict with the Joker – connects along the narrative’s syntagmatic axis, its frequent use of ‘motifs’ from ‘comic books, Hollywood films, nineteenth century novels [and] medieval architecture’ simultaneously establishes links with many antecedent texts along a paradigmatic axis. Collins attributes the prevalence of this mode of ‘intertextual narration’ within popular texts to an increased general awareness and interest in the history of pop culture among producers and audiences. Yet, specifically within contemporary comic-book production, this

narrative mode has also been absorbed as part of writers and illustrators' wider strategy to complement publishers' audience-targeting aims. Writers and illustrators often deploy intertextual allusions that imply to dedicated readers the presence of continuity – in this case, thematic continuity – within a vast storyworld; less dedicated readers are unlikely to pick up on these allusions.

This practice is evidenced, for example, by the connections established between Morrison's *Batman & Robin* run and DC's 'Blackest Night' crossover event (2009-2010). In the latter narrative, Green Lantern and his allies defend the universe from a possessed legion of heroes and villains resurrected from their graves. In the sixth issue of the eight-part *Blackest Night* mini-series, published February 2010, (a deceased) Bruce Wayne rises to join the undead's fold in Coast City, California. The first issue of Morrison's slyly titled 'Blackest Knight' arc on *Batman & Robin* (#7-9) landed in stores the following month. Within that issue, Batman (Dick Grayson) attempts to bring a deceased Bruce Wayne clone back to life courtesy of a 'Lazarus pit' located in a Northumbrian mine. In the subsequent issue, the reanimated Wayne-clone proves to be a demented zombie, resulting in Batman having to quell the threat. According to Morrison, his arc was designed to complement 'Blackest Night'. But, 'rather than tie directly into the main event', he recalls, 'we chose to reflect it in a more thematic way with this story of a walking dead man'.³⁷

While the events of the 'Blackest Knight' story arc don't directly link to those of the 'Blackest Night' plot via the syntagmatic axis, their shared similarities in storyworld theme encourage dedicated DC readers to detect an association between the two different storylines along the paradigmatic axis. The coincidence in publication times of the respective periodicals further encouraged this paradigmatic linking. So too did Frank Quitely's cover art for the first issue of the *Batman & Robin*

arc, which features a detailed portrait of the eerie, undead Batman. But, crucially, due to the nature of Morrison's allusions to wider continuity, the new and/or casual *Batman & Robin* reader can enjoy the 'Blackest Knight' storyline as a self-contained dramatic conflict without having to be aware of the Green Lantern's battles with raised corpses in *Blackest Night*. Morrison's technique contradicts the traditional direct market practice, which developed out of an aim to attract highly committed readers, of explicitly connecting a publisher's range of books via the syntagmatic axis of a major crossover event narrative. Yet this new technique meets the requirements of dedicated consumers, while simultaneously serving the needs of a wider audience, in keeping with DC's 21st Century consumer-targeting strategies.

For 'The Court of Owls' (#1-12, 2011-2012), the first *Batman* story arc of the New 52 era, Snyder also opted to engage dedicated readers through the establishing of thematic connections with antecedent DC narratives. The story arc concerns Batman's battle with the Court of Owls, a secret criminal society that includes a cadre of deadly assassins – dubbed 'Talons' – within its membership. While the Court – a Snyder creation – is revealed to have manipulated Gotham for centuries, this story arc marks its debut within DC fiction. Yet 'The Court of Owls' was nonetheless strongly inspired by previous storylines concerning owl-themed characterisations scattered throughout Batman's prior history. 'Everything is a re-imagining of the elements that went into Owl villains [and other characters] in *Batman*', notes Snyder; 'the whole story, honestly, came flowing out of that'.³⁸

Early in 'The Court of Owls', for example, Batman discovers (misleading) evidence suggesting that Dick Grayson (since returned to his Nightwing role) was a former Talon. This plot point evokes the theme of a *Batman* issue storyline published decades previous (#107, 1957) in which a young Dick temporarily adopts the persona

of ‘Owlman’. As Snyder acknowledges, this type of intertextual referencing is deliberately intended to engage and reward the dedicated reader: ‘Within the story itself, the history of Gotham is brought against the heroes of the present.... And then for readers of Batman and lovers of Batman and the Bat-mythology, there are story elements that feel that way on a meta-level, you know? It’s like, “Hey, I remember that issue where Robin was Owlman. Look at this, now Dick was supposed to have been a Talon.”’” But by relying on subtle evocations of thematic continuity – which are unlikely to even register with a new/casual readership – as a means to address loyal and knowledgeable consumers, Snyder is still able to meet his objective of crafting coherent, self-contained story arcs. He ensures therefore that his narratives are also appropriate for those readers less committed to DC’s highly complex fictional universe.

Conclusion

Expanding upon previous scholarship linking US comic-book production contexts in the 1980s and 1990s to prevalent narrative modes of the period, this chapter demonstrates how subsequent industrial transitions have influenced shifts in storytelling strategy. It shows how publishers, faced with the direct market’s decreased revenues, have in recent years adjusted formatting and distribution practices to complement their recalibrated audience-targeting aims. Using Batman narratives as a case study, it reveals how writers and illustrators have complemented these aims via the development of a range of implied continuity techniques intended to address the contrasting requirements of two distinct audience groups. This chapter thus speaks to this book’s broad concern with Batman and his media, highlighting the

contingency of Batman narrative on specific – and highly changeable – conditions of production within a given medium.

While the chief focus of this chapter on techniques of evoking continuity within superhero narratives has been a necessarily narrow one, the recent reconfiguration of the US comic book industry in terms of audience targeting has had a wider influence on its storytelling. As I demonstrate elsewhere, for example, publishers' aims this century to appeal to a potential wider audience of consumers mostly familiar with Hollywood movie incarnations of superheroes has had a significant impact on comic book narrative; for instance, certain comic-book story arcs have been consciously conceived to resonate with particular superhero movies, while comic-book visual style during this period is often emulative that of modern action filmmaking.³⁹ As the US comic-book industry continues to evolve – as it, for example, turns increasingly to the nascent digital comics form as a means to broaden its readership, it will be useful to further trace connections between publishers' priorities in the marketplace and the narratives they disseminate.

Notes

¹ The company had carried out a less comprehensive simplification of continuity in 1986.

² The New 52 moniker reflects the number of #1 books DC simultaneously launched as part of the initiative.

³ Melissa Block, ‘Several DC Comics Go Back To Issue No. 1’, *NPR*, 31 August 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/08/31/140093549/several-dc-comics-go-back-to-issue-no-1>.

⁴ In the case of Superman, for example, the only significant backstory material that remained following The New 52 continuity reboot was a version of his standard origin story.

⁵ Admin1, ‘CBR TV @NYCC: Scott Snyder on “Batman,” “Severed” and Bat Continuity’, *Comic Book Resources*, 16 October 2011, <http://video.comicbookresources.com/cbrtv/2011/cbr-tv-nycc-scott-snyder-on-batman-severed-and-bat-continuity/>.

⁶ See *Batman & Robin* #1 (2009).

⁷ See *Detective Comics* #871-881 (2010-2011).

⁸ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001); Matthew J. Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999).

⁹ The term is adapted from Matt Hills’ ‘implied story arc’, which he uses to describe the subtle connections made between individual episodes of *Doctor Who* during Russell T. Davies tenure as executive producer on the television series. Matt Hills, ‘Absent Epic, Implied Story Arcs, and Variation on a Narrative Theme: *Doctor Who* (2005-2008) as Cult/Mainstream Television’, in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, eds Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 333-342.

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotic in Texts* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1981), 113-114, 117. Despite this tendency, there are a few exceptional instances of continuity being established within early superhero

comic books. For Batman-related examples, see Pat, 'Some Golden Age Continuity Examples', *Nothing but Batman*, 22 December 2009, <http://nothingbutbatman.blogspot.co.uk/2009/12/some-golden-age-continuity-examples.html>.

¹¹ See 'Notes from the Batcave: An Interview with Dennis O'Neil', in this volume, p. ?

¹² On the transitory status of comic books pre-1960, see Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 15.

¹³ By the mid-1960s some bookstores began to sate this demand by specialising in the sale of back-issues. *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 93.

¹⁵ For example, while DC had launched new versions of The Flash and Green Lantern in the late-1950s, it developed in the 1960s continuity between these new identities and prior versions of the same heroes by suggesting that latter continued to exist within a parallel reality.

¹⁶ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 260-262; Pustz, *Comic-Book Culture*, 15; Chuck Rozanski, 'Evolution of the Direct Market: Part One', *Mile High Comics*, November 2003, <http://www.milehighcomics.com/tales/cbg95.html>.

¹⁷ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 260-262.

¹⁸ Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 134.

¹⁹ The pair cite prior events within continuity, including instances of Dick's impetuosity and ill discipline (Bruce: 'When *you* didn't listen to me, *your* injuries weren't fatal'), Bruce's removal of Dick from the Robin role (Bruce: 'I would have

had to *fire him* [Jason] as I did you’) and Dick’s chagrin at Bruce having adopted Jason (Bruce: ‘*You* told me you resented it that I had adopted *him* and not you’).

²⁰ See *Batman* #487 (1992)

²¹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 280,

²² *Ibid.*, 283.

²³ The term ‘graphic novel’ is popularly used to denote a comics publication that is distinguished from standard periodical comic books by its greater bulk and its card or hard-back cover.

²⁴ For more on the emergence of the graphic novel market, see Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005) and William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, “I’m Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise” in this volume.

²⁵ Anon., ‘Graphic Novels by the Numbers’, *Publishers Weekly*, 3 May 2007, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20070305/4192-graphic-novels-by-the-numbers.html>. The dollar sales for the top 300 comic books from each month distributed to speciality stores in 2001 totalled \$186.98 million. John Jackson Miller, ‘Comic Book Sales by Year’, *Comichron*, <http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales.html>.

²⁶ Regarding DC and Marvel’s perception of the collected edition as the best format with which to address casual consumers, see Milton Griep, ‘20 Questions: Paul Levitz, Part II: DC’s Executive VP Talks About the Comic Business’, *ICv2*, 10 March 2001, <http://www.icv2.com/articles/indepth/759.html>. Owen Vaughan, ‘An Interview with Spider-Man’s Boss, Marvel Chief Joe Quesada’, *The Times*, 21 March 2009, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/books/article2454472.ece>. As an example of increased collected edition production, Marvel’s backlist of in-print titles grew from

approximately 250 in 2001 to upwards of 1,100 in 2011. Anon., 'Marvel Ratchets Up Book Production', *ICv2*, 12 March 2001,

<http://www.icv2.com/articles/news/220.html>; John Rhett Thomas, *Marvel Backlist Chronology* (Marvel, New York, 2011).

²⁷ John Jackson Miller, 'Comics and graphic novel market reaches \$870 million in 2013', *Comichron*, 15 July 2014, <http://blog.comichron.com/2014/07/comics-and-graphic-novel-market-reaches.html>.

²⁸ Seth Rosenblatt, 'Digital comics successful sidekick to print, say publishers', CNET, 20 July 2013, <http://www.cnet.com/uk/news/digital-comics-successful-sidekick-to-print-say-publishers/>; Miller, 'Comics and graphic novel market'.

²⁹ Heidi McDonald, 'DC's Rood Breaks Down Reader Survey', *Publishers Weekly*, 14 February 2012, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/booknews/comics/article/50633-dc-s-rood-breaks-down-reader-survey.html>.

³⁰ Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 134. This is a perspective that key DC and Marvel personnel of the late-1990s/2000s, such as former DC Publisher and President Paul Levitz and former Marvel Publisher Bill Jemas, have shared. See Griep, '20 Questions'; Sean T. Collins, 'The Amazing! Incredible! Uncanny Oral History of Marvel Comics', *Maxim*, 12 August 2009, <http://www.maxim.com/amg/humor/stupid-fun/83588/amazing-incredible-uncanny-oral-history-marvel-comics.html>.

³¹ Tony 'G Man' Guerrero, 'Interview: Scott Snyder Talks 'Return of the Joker: Death of the Family'', *Comic Vine*, 9 July 2012, <http://www.comicvine.com/articles/interview-scott-snyder-talks-return-of-the-joker-d/1100-144917/>.

³² Morrison's (intermittent) run on *Batman* stretches from 2006-2011; he also launched the ongoing series *Batman & Robin* (in 2009) and *Batman Incorporated* (in 2011). Snyder began writing *Detective Comics* in 2010 before taking charge of *Batman* in 2011 (where, at the time of writing, he remains).

³³ Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 69-71.

³⁵ Karen Lury, *Interpreting Television* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 14.

³⁶ Grant Morrison, 'Morrison Manifesto', in *New X-Men Ultimate Collection Vol. 3*, Grant Morrison (New York: Marvel, 2008) [no page numbers given].

³⁷ Grant Morrison, Cameron Stewart and Andy Clarke, *Batman & Robin: Batman Vs. Robin* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 154.

³⁸ Vaneta Rogers, 'Scott Snyder on BATMAN #10 & You-Know-Who [SPOILERS]', *Newsarama*, 14 June 2012, <http://www.newsarama.com/9671-spoiler-sport-scott-snyder-on-batman-10-you-know-who.html>.

³⁹ Anthony N. Smith, 'Media Contexts of Narrative Design: *Dimensions of Specificity* within Storytelling Industries' (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2013). Derek Johnson similarly considers the influence of superhero blockbusters on comic-book storytelling with regards to articulations of familiar characters; see Derek Johnson, 'Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up? Marvel's Mutation From Monthlies to Movies', in *Film and Comic Books*, eds Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich and Matthew McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 64-85.