

## **Multimodal representation of the 9-11 events in super-hero comic books.**

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This paper aims at investigating the representations of the September 11, 2001 (henceforth 9-11) events, taken place in the United States of América, in super-hero comic books published by Marvel and DC Comics. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Fairclough & Chouliaraki, 1999) provides with the theoretical framework for the study. Sociocultural practices are looked at from the perspective of Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984) as proposed by Meurer (2004, 2006). Text is explored in accordance with Kress & Van Leeuwen's visual grammar and multimodal discourse (1996, 2001, 2002), insofar as comic books employ both visual and verbal resources in the creation of meanings. The analysis reveals that the comic books related to the 9-11 events promote the effacement of history, as they eliminate intricate historical relationships between the United States and the growth of an Islamic group – Taliban – in Afghanistan, pointing as motivations for the 9-11 attacks in US grounds the envy 'barbarians' feel for the wealthy and freedom US citizens allegedly possess.

### **1. Introduction**

In the book *Age of extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm refers to World War I as the event that marked the beginning of the XX Century and points out the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as the end of it. I believe that, had the author the opportunity to write a thorough review of the XXI Century, Hobsbawm would pinpoint the events taken place in the United States of America on the day of September 11, 2001 as the benchmark of this new century.

The destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City were broadcast live and consistently repeated all over the world in the following days. The terrorist attack became the symbol of a anti-terror politics that has justified the invasion of Afghanistan, in the year 2002, and Iraq, in 2003, to mention only two important historical events justified by the 9-11 attacks (Chomsky, 2003), as they were vastly explored in the media, including TV news, newspapers, magazines and comic books.

My aim in this paper is to discuss the representation of 9-11 events in comic books published subsequently considering that “the narratives of media culture offer patterns of proper and improper behaviour, moral messages, and ideological conditioning (...)” (Durham and Kellner, 2001, p.1), bearing in mind that as artists represent those events, they are also interpreting them. Since comic books also make part of narratives of media culture, my contention is that they also play a role in the transformation of the 9-11 tragedy, where many lives were lost, into a symbolic event that is constantly evoked whenever is necessary to justify actions from the part of the USA Government (Jackson, 2005), who makes use of discourse in the creation of consent in “the exercise of power” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 33).

Narrative in comic books is construed through the use of different modes (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001), that is, different semiotic resources are applied in the production of meanings. The narrative is presented by making use of two main modes, namely, verbal and visual language. The former is used in speech boxes and captions and the latter is the most important element of comics, a pictorial medium, as artists make use of panels (or frames), drawings, panel and page layout and colors in the creation of meanings (Saraceni, 2003; Veloso, 2006). These are the elements I shall focus on as I carry out the analysis of excerpts from the *The Amazing Spider-Man #36*®, published in December 2001 and *Captain American #1*®, published in June, 2002, both by Marvel Comics.

## **2. The analysis**

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Figure 2.1 is formed of the first two pages of the comic book. Occupying a central position on the page, the depicted scene apotheotically shows the World Trade Center towers falling down, involved by a cloud of dust that rises high up in the sky. At the right hand corner of the double page, we find Spider-Man looking at the towers falling down, head down and held by his hands, backwards to the viewer. The whole scene is an *offer*, as there is no interaction with the viewer, who is allowed to see more than the hero does. Here, I share with Kress and van Leuween (1996, p. 124) the notion used in visual analysis that when an image is an *offer* there is no contact between the participant being represented and the viewer, that is, it offers “the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case”.



Figure 2.1: pages 3 and 4 from *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36.

Thus, the viewer is given the opportunity to witness the dust that spreads around the ruins as well as Spider-man's desperation, verbally expressed by the interjection "...God..." – a powerful interpersonal element that implies that there is nothing left to be said. No words can express the pain or portray the scene itself.

At the bottom of Figure 2.1 there are three caption boxes, which are part of the narration that will guide the reader throughout the story. In the captions, there is the occurrence of a Relational Process (*are*), where "some things" is the Carrier of the Attributes: "beyond words"; "beyond comprehension" and "beyond forgiveness", which appears in the following page of the story. My contention is that these sentences provide one with one of the most salient significations to the 9-11 attacks. Clearly, "some things" refers to the destruction promoted by individuals that will later be identified in this comic book, but in this first moment it is the mayhem they have provoked that matters. No words can actually express how Spider-man or the other participants that are shown in the story feel. As the reader follows the hero's narration, he/she is induced to realize that it is extremely difficult to make sense of what happened, but it is verbally indicated that the perpetrators will not be forgiven, that is, there will be search and punishment for those responsible for the attacks.

The first twenty pages of *Captain America #1*, entitled *Enemy – Chapter 1: Dust*, show the super-hero at the ground zero and attempts to express the pain and dismay caused by the 9-11 attacks, and raises questions similar to those found in *Spider-man #36*. The introductory pages make reference to the perpetrators of the attacks, and the words used to refer to them contribute to the construction of an image of violent, merciless people, as can be seen in Figure 2.2.

The page layout of Figure 2.2 is composed of four panels on each side, but still in a rectangle. The space in between panels is larger to fit sentences. The caption that follows the first panel, filled only with the red color, indicates that action takes place at an unspecified sight.

In this pictorial narrative the image zoom out a little at every panel. The second panel shows two shotguns, one at each side of the frame. In the third frame the reader gets to see “the handful of men” the captions had projected, and also learns that there is a man sitting in between the raising shotguns who is in a central position. The last frame of the left page is a distant shot that permits to identify the location as a cave, a hidden place.



Figure 2.2: Representing the ‘terrorist’ on the pages of *Captain America #1*.

The first frame on the right takes the reader/viewer back to the interior of the cave. All the men are still shadows except for the man in the center. He is represented in a shade of red similar to the one used on the left page. The first caption refers to minutes, when time of waiting is established as twenty minutes, and the narrative continues to inform of an act of extreme violence with the information about “[f]our thousand murders”. Images zoom in, and the reader/viewer gets closer to this central body, which wears a long beard and a turban. These two elements suggest his origin, as he fits the stereotype of a man who is from the more strict Muslim countries in the Middle East. The third frame is a close shot of this man and focuses on the lower part of his face, cutting off his eyes, so that there is no contact between the man being represented and the viewer. The last frame shows a shotgun occupying center position in the panel, raised in the air accompanied by fists closed, signaling celebration, which had been implied by the captions when they refer to ‘praising God’. The layout of the page helps to reinforce the countdown suggested by the captions.

This double page sequence is noteworthy in the construction of the identity of the terrorists: there are no faces being clearly depicted, but mostly shadows against a brownish background. The only human figure occupying a central position in the group as well as in the picture is a slightly blurred figure of a long-bearded man wearing a turban. This visual representation seems to deprive him of a specific identity as he may stand for the face of many other men, opening the possibility of seeing this figure as an archetype of terrorists, characterizing them as “inherently cruel, hateful, murderous, and lacking in human values; they are savages living on

the ‘hunted margin of mankind’” (Jackson, 2005, p. 62), as they hide underneath, in a reference to Afghanistan, living in caves.

The second line in Figure 2.2 corroborates the characterization of the terrorists as living outside established social conventions, referring to them as having *famished eyes* and, in the next frame, construing them as gathering in a cave. Consequently, such features depict these people as barbarians, who perhaps are not only hungry for food in their primitive habitat, but also for blood, for violence, their identity being defined not simply through what they are, but insidiously through what they are not if we consider the positive representation of the USA. Jackson (2005, p. 72-73) points out that in the process of constructing the identity of terrorists in the US media there was an effort to build them as ‘inhuman’, as the news and official speeches would refer to them with epithets such as “animals”, “a cancer of the human condition”, “parasites”, “an evil and inhuman group of men”, “the scourge of terrorism” and “faceless enemies of human dignity” – all of them applicable to the identity of the terrorists as presented in this story.

It is in this sense that significations and forms of legitimation constitute structuring elements (Meurer, 2004, 2006): the US government and its armies will act catapulted by those significations and forms of legitimation. These images have their meanings reinforced by epithets such as *butchers* (in Figure 2.3), used by Captain America to refer to terrorists.

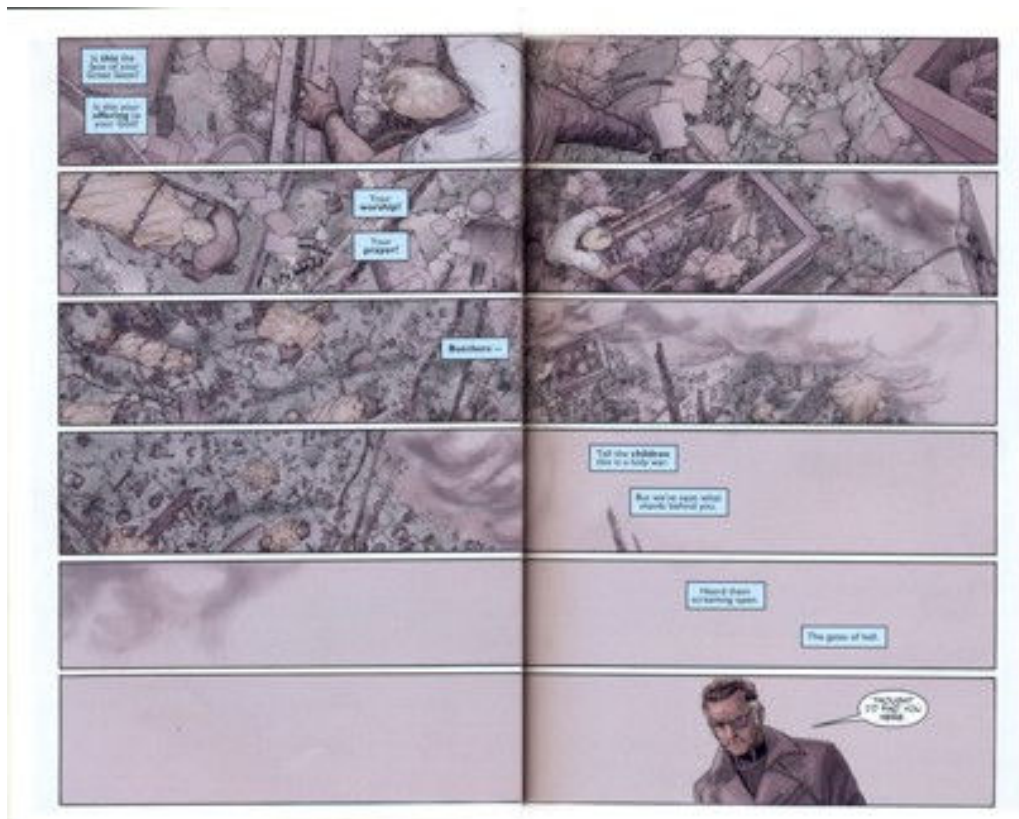


Figure 2.3: Epithets such as “butchers” contribute to the construction of the terrorist.

Figure 2.3 is a distant shot from above. There is a sequence of six panels, all of them rectangular, taking the width of two pages. The images zoom out from the first to the fourth panels, like a camera position from the top, slowly moving away from Steve Rogers – Captain America – and including other people working over the debris of the twin towers, allowing the viewer to see the mayhem at the ground zero.

### 3. Conclusion

In the process of representing and, as a consequence, re-interpreting the events taken place on 9-11 in New York City, the comic books I have analyzed portray a logic of victimization (Zizek, 2003), following patterns pointed out by Jackson



(2005), as the comics systematically construct a bifurcated representation of reality, where there are only evil terrorists in opposition to ‘good Americans’. According to Jackson (2005, p. 62), after the 9-11 attacks the US Government embraced an official discourse “deliberately designed to essentialise, demonise and dehumanize the terrorist ‘other’ for specific political reasons”. The political reasons the author refers to are the invasion of Afghanistan and later on of Iraq, previously mentioned.

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