**‘The Real Mainstream’: Undoing the Mainstream and Alternative Divide**

1. This is a new project and I can present only a schematic outline here, so any comments or feedback would be helpful. Indicative of the general thrust of the paper is this image of Steve Rogers vacuuming while worrying about how he’s going to pay the rent, which I’d like to title Captain American Splendour.

2.As the word suggests, mainstream refers to a path or direction taken by the majority. It is the most prevalent, but also has connotations of conventional and normal, and through the idea of the norm it has a connection to authority and power. To undo the distinction between mainstream and underground or alternative comics that I believe is unworkable it is necessary to reconsider the ‘purity’ of these lineages and histories. We also need to challenge the persistence of distinctions between high and low culture that continue to damage the reputation of the medium, and which can be seen in the constellation of contestations and anxieties that inhabit the problematic term graphic novel. In addition, it is necessary to acknowledge that what is alternative is not universally so, and is itself riven with mainstream bias. In turn, what we regard as mainstream has its own forms of peripheral expression that we are in danger of diminishing in our dismissal of what we pejoratively call ‘commercial comics’. For the purposes of analysis, I will work through these many interrelated issues by separating them into lineages, cultures and centres.

3.Lineages

4.I have no time to explore this here, but it is imperative to understand that the early days of ‘commercial comics’ in the US did not exclude the ontological politics nor the aesthetic experimentation that is more readily connected to underground and alternative comics.

5. The lineages have always developed through a process of intermingling. You don’t need to be an expert in deconstruction to see how, as the underground first used the mainstream as a foil for expression, its identity was constructed in and through this ‘other’. This intermingling also resulted in moments of collaboration as the creator of *It Ain’t me Babe* went on to become the first woman to drawn Wonder Woman for DC in 1986, and in doing so created a beautiful homage to the original artist H. G. Peter.

6. As underground comix evolved into ‘alternative comics’ in the 1970s and ‘80s, this influence has continued in the work of Chris Ware, Daniel Clowes, the Hernandez brothers and Charles Burns.

7. It can also be seen in the work of Jeffrey Brown who is undoubtedly someone still working in the tradition of underground comix.

8. The connection was strong enough to warrant DC publishing Bizarro Comics in 2001 when alternative creators were given the chance to play with superhero characters. Here is Dylan Horrocks’s imagining of a café catch-up between Supergirl and a retired Mary Marvel.

9 and 10. Since then, creators within the world of alternative comics such as Jeff Lemire have regularly made the transition to the mainstream, bringing alternative sensibilities with them.

11 and 12. Others such as Ed Brubaker, wrote one of the best critiques of the Bush Doctrine that you’ll find in popular culture while working on Captain America,

13 and 14. and Hope Larson, who took over Batgirl in 2016.

15. In terms of scholarship, important work on the instability of this division includes Doug Singsen’s work on ‘ground level comics’, which exist somewhere between the underground and above ground of the so-called mainstream, and includes publishers like Dark Horse and Valiant, while Julia Round and Christophe Dony have done important work on Vertigo as a publisher that regularly shows the permeability of the mainstream/alternative division.

16. The mainstream also produces stories that would seem to be more comfortable in the world of alternative comics, such as *Magneto: Testament* by Greg Pak, which is a very non-superhero telling of a holocaust story.

17. This book also includes a short, appended story called ‘The Final Outrage’. This is an account of how someone survived the holocaust by being required to paint for the camp commander. It tells the story of the attempt to retrieve the paintings after the war, and it would not be out of place as a supplement to Spiegelman’s *Maus*.

18. Cultures

19. At least since the advent of modernism, art and literary criticism has been dominated by the idea that legitimacy is granted only to examples of autonomous production. This is understood as ‘art for art sake’, or the practice of reflexively interrogating the medium of the artist’s chosen field to create avant garde works experimenting in from, material, movement, space, time, figure, and narrative. A quintessential example of this would be one of Mondrian’s early explorations of grids from 1916.

In opposition to this, is the commercial world of heteronomous art where works are created for money or favour. An example would be one of Mondrian’s lilies, painted in 1921, that he would sell in order to be able to devote himself to his grids. The logic stats that the first (autonomous) is good, the second (heteronomous) is bad; the first is high culture, the second is low culture.

20. As I noted in the previous section, however, this already ignores the fact that the early commercial comics, even in the US tradition, were highly experimental. Such a blinkered view is now uncritically repeated in the pejorative use of the term ‘mainstream’, which encourages us to forget that even its most flagrantly commercial products nevertheless retain some element of autonomous production where creators continue to explore what comics do—a question that Jack Kirby was no doubt asking himself when he produced his first double page spread for *Captain America Comics* in #6 in 1941.

21. It has also been well documented that EC published material that was both aesthetically innovative and politically significant. Works by Harvey Kurzmann and Bernard Krigstein are often held up as exemplary in this regard. It must also be noted that this innovation and quality was killed off by the Comics Code driven by a moral panic already fuelled by assumptions about high and low culture, and what is to be deemed worthy and what is trash. The use of ‘mainstream comics’ today remains informed by these prejudices.

22. In the 1960s the artwork in commercial comics continued to evolve. Again, Jack Kirby’s monumentalism and his work in mixed media are really good examples.

23. In fact, the artwork of Silver Age comics had become so stylized that is was recognised as a new way of seeing and representing; in short it was a new form of art. Of course, for that legitimacy to be bestowed it had to be appropriated, if not actually plagiarised by the institutions and agents of high culture. Once, in this case, Irv Novick’s work in *All-American Men of War* #89 from 1962 had been translated into their own discursive practice it was good, but they continued to pour scorn on the originals. I would argue that this attitude continues to inform our use of the term mainstream.

24. It is also evident in the knot of bourgeois anxieties collected in the term ‘graphic novel’. I don’t deny that ‘graphic novel’ is a useful term for one form of the comics medium, but in using it we must avoid the kind scholarship that denigrates the medium more broadly, as when Stephen E. Tabachnick writes in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*: ‘The graphic novel—an extended comic book freed of commercial constrictions, written by adults for adults, and able to tackle complex and sophisticated issues using all the tools available to the best artists and writers—is the newest literary/artistic genre and one of the most exciting areas of humanistic study today’. We might expect this from a press baring the name of one of the most elitist educational establishments in the world, but the long form comic is not new, it is not free from commercial constraints, it does not have sole claim to either adult storytelling or complex and sophisticated issues, nor does it have exclusive rights to the best artists and writers, and it is absolutely *not* a *genre*.

25. Centres

26. As I noted in the introduction, the division between mainstream and alternative sets up a topography of centre and margins or periphery, but if we do not recognise that such a topography exists within both sides of the division we will produce problematic scholarship and fail to recognise the important and complex cultural politics at play in the comics medium.

We know, for example, that the underground scene was very above ground in terms of its gender politics, which were patriarchal and sexist, and regularly misogynistic. Take S. Clay Wilson’s ‘A Ball in the Bung Hole’ from *Zap Comix* #4 as one of many examples. We also know from Trina Robbins that what went for the content also applied to the culture. The underground was hence very mainstream in its treatment and representation of women.

27. Also, if we treat the so-called mainstream as somehow uniformly reproducing dominant prejudices and ideologies then we fail to see the attempts by traditionally marginalised groups to express their identity within the medium, and we do them a great disservice. By talking about the superhero genre as mainstream, for example, we diminish the challenges being made and reinforce the fallacious idea that is now popular on the political right that it is a genre owned by and created for straight white men.

28. We also miss the fact that some of the most enduring of superheroes have the most radical of missions, far more radical than anything Robert Crumb offered the world. Wonder woman’s mission of world peace through the refiguring of gender and sexual relations is yet to be matched, and is a vision that would certainly find a home in many of the longer form comics that we collect under the term ‘alternative’.

29. There is also a tendency to overlook how much commercial comics were already a vehicle for expression, a term that is central to Hatfield’s understanding of the emergence of alternative comics. To suggest that Superman’s attempts to physically transform the environment around him is not the authentic expression of genuine desire on the part of his young Jewish creators to transform their own environment is to miss the character’s real superpower and diminish the medium’s role. There is nothing ‘jejune and mechanical’ (Hatfield 7) about Superman in 1938.

30. Equally there is nothing ‘jejune and mechanical’ about a gay Latina superhero who can punch inter-dimensional holes in reality.

31. Or a shape shifting Pakistani-American superhero who constantly articulates the experience of young women of colour, Asian-Americans and Zoomers. Only our bias in relation to types of knowledge, types of expression, and types of narrative permit us to be blind to these intimacies.

32. The type of criticism that privileges a particular type of expression as underground or alternative also reproduces the reactionary trope that fetishizes the author. This is perhaps the most conventional or mainstream aspect of criticism that treats auteur comics as alternative. It completely misses how the comics become a means of expression for readers and fans.

33. This criticism also regular reproduces the ideology of the individual and his or her monolingualism, while at the same time overlooking that radical dialogism and heteroglossia that have always been a major component of so-called mainstream or commercial comics. Despite editorial control, superhero comics in particular contain stories produced by collectives that are regularly disassembled and reassembled allowing radical reinterpretations of a character. Such as the time Geoff Johns acknowledged that Batman’s economy of fear made him a very likely Yellow Lantern.

34. As noted under 31, the division also privileges specific types of knowledge. Commercial comics, especially superhero comics are often understood, again rather pejoratively, in terms of myth, and yet this division between mythology and more scientific knowledge represented in the everyday empirical realism of alternative comics simply produces the sort of epistemological eurocentrism that underpinned colonialism. A reassessment of myth as a way of knowing is therefore crucial for the decolonization of comics studies.

35. ‘The Real Mainstream’

36. Having tried to suggest that the so-called mainstream is a lot more alternative than is readily accepted, what are we to make of so-called ‘alternative comics’. Most of them contain content that in another medium would be considered mainstream.

37. The world of alternative comics and their manifestation in form of the graphic novel are replete with autobiography.

38. These have become some of the most celebrated.

39. They also contain historical biography

40. historical testimony

41. and literary non-fiction

42. In fact, as my friend Stephen Holland, proprietor of Page 45, the best shop in sector 2814, would argue, these are the real mainstream. These are the stories that if they were in the form of a novel or regular non-fiction prose book would be the first to greet you as you walked in the door, while the niche fantasy stuff is further back in the shop. His argument is that if we continue to use the ‘alternative’ or ‘small press’ tag we will continue to alienate potential readers and newcomers to the incredible medium that we love.

43. Think about it, a witch with reality warping powers who marries a synthezoid and has children with him by using fragments of Mephisto’s lost soul and then destroys all mutant-kind when she finds out the children were a figment of her imagination is pretty niche! Even judged by the most liberal attitudes towards relationship and what constitutes a family, this is pretty alternative!