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A Future-Oriented Past: Deictic Reformulations of WWII in Contemporary War Comics

Abstract

In recent years, the representation of the Second World War in US pop culture has undergone a radical transformation, especially in war comics. The conflict has indeed ceased to be depicted only in accurate historical reconstructions or on survivors’ personal memories: several recent World War Two comics memorialize historical events only up to a certain point, beyond which they reinterpret history and envision a hypothetical future staged on World War Two but inspired by contemporary elements and preoccupations. In light of this transformation, this essay will demonstrate how one of the main products of post-generational comics about World War Two is a representational mode originated from a multi-layered imagination of the war itself, rooted in historical records but contaminated by post-Cold War era cultural tropes. This examination transcends Marianne Hirsch’s notion of postmemory as strictly activated within familial bonds, but it implies the transfer of World War Two collective memory to a post-generation (broadly intended) of people “who were not actually there.” I will focus on Garth Ennis’ miniseries *Bloody Mary* (1996), and Kieron Gillen’s ongoing series, titled *Über* (2013-present). Both texts envision dystopian contemporary societies torn apart by World War Two, which did not end in 1945 but continued into the 21st century, and both narratives present elements pertaining to the official memory, as well as on a constellation of components which are part of a contemporary and deictic war imagination.

Within the universe of war comics, the Second World War certainly constitutes the most represented conflict of Western culture. The bulk of “war comics” was produced during the second half of the 1950s and the expression encompasses all the graphic anthologies about war, whose content was dominated by stories set in the various fronts of the Second World War. Scholars have debated about the several reasons that can possibly explain the density with which the Second World War has characterized graphic narratives, especially in the US comics culture (see Dauber 2006 and Scott 2007). In particular, the war acquired the aura of a crusade against the evil (as Dwight D. Eisenhower defined it) – visually and ethically connoted – which soon became a palimpsest that could be readapted to other contexts, such as the Cold War. As Jacques R. Pauwels observes, the Second

World War was immediately depicted in the US public discourse as the good war as well as that of the “Greatest Generation,” particularly through the mediation of Hollywood: “The countless popular war movies produced by Tinseltown in the fifties and sixties, such as the D-Day epic *The Longest Day*, propagated in a far from subtle yet very effective way the idea that an idealist USA had gone to war in order to restore freedom and justice in Europe and just about everywhere in the world” (2015, 19-20). Although Pauwles contends that the reasons that fostered the US struggle in the Second World War were by no means idealistic nor ideological, he also acknowledges the rhetorical strength of the narrative within which the war effort was encapsulated, which he defines as national mythology:

The Second World War was also a good war in the sense that it was fought against ‘an enemy of unspeakable evil,’ as Howard Zinn has put it. That enemy was fascism in general and its German version, Nazism, in particular – an ideology and a system which will forever remain associated with oppression at home, with aggression abroad, with horrible war crimes, and with genocide, a Moloch to which millions of people fell victim in relatively few years. A war against such an evil was necessarily a good war. (2002, 267-268)

Michael C.C. Adams provides a similar perspective and elaborates a sharpened argument as he does not dwell on the notion of a mythology of the Second World War, but more overtly problematizes such a master narrative as a “mythologized version of the era” which he identifies as the result of “a complex period of history [that] became simplified into the popular story of the Best War Ever” (1994, 15). According to Adams, the moral range of such a representative mode solidified to the point of becoming paradigmatic, as he claims that “For generations of Americans, World War II has been the historical reference point that transformed and defined the future path of their country” (1994, 13).

The purpose of this essay is to examine the progressive transformation of the narrative modalities through which the mythology of the Second World War has interpolated the US popular culture along the “future path” of the nation not so much in the first few decades after the conflict, as much as in the forms of popular representation of the last thirty years. Despite the vastity of examples that have been produced recently,¹ the present analysis will be limited to two cases that are

¹ For example, Garth Ennis’ *Adventures of the Rifle Brigade* (1990), Mike Mignola’s *Hellboy* (1993), Chuck Dixon’s *Team Zero* (2006), or Ted Nomura’s *Dictators of the Twentieth Century* (2006). Moreover, several war comic sagas that had been running during the 1960s and 1970s have been recently renewed, such as Garth Ennis’ *War Stories* (2001), illustrated by numerous artists including Dave Gibbons, Frank Marraffino’s *The Haunted Tank* (2007), and *Battlefield* (2008) also by Garth Ennis, who, in 2016, wrote *Dreaming Eagles* (illustrated by Simon

believed significant because they constitute two among the latest evolutionary stages of the cultural consolidation of World War Two: *Bloody Mary*, written by Garth Ennis and illustrated by Carlos Ezquerra, published in 1996, and *Über and Über Invasion* written by Kieron Gillen and illustrated by Caanan White, published from 2013 and ongoing.

The abundance of narrative tropes that emerged in the decades that followed the Second World War from the popular imaginary soon started to fuel new forms of representation of the conflict and to contaminate the representation of other wars through the lenses of the Second World War. Along with its exceptional ethic status² in collective memory, the Second World War acquired the traits of a narrative paradigm that World War One had only partially embodied before the break out of the former: for example, as Ross J. Wilson argues, in England “the popular memory of the war, as represented in political cartoons, is far more than a simple reiteration of clichés. Indeed, these representations use references to the events of 1914 - 1918 to create new meanings by framing contemporary social and political debates far removed from the conflict itself” (2015, 84), a dynamic which transpired also among US cartoonists, such as Will Eisner. Yet, World War One as a cultural paradigm was replaced by the following war, whose atrocities, ideological stances, and visuality showed a stronger endurance and adaptability to Western narratives of the 20th century.³

In fact, the imaginative potential that the Second World War has generated on the Western popular culture has been such that the conflict has recently become the model through which even World War One has been remediated. One of the most evident examples of this transformation, provided by popular mass culture, can be identified in Patty Jenkins’ *Wonder Woman* (2017). The movie shows the genesis of the heroine and establishes a connection between her character and the rest of the narrative universe she belongs to. Soon after encountering her first human being, Amazon princess Diana is soon taken to the trenches of the French front where she intends to find and fight Ares, the god of

Coleby). A very recent partial reformulation of a classic of war comics is James Robinson and Greg Hinkle’s reboot of *Airboy* (2017).

² Certainly, the Vietnam War produced a similar effect on other conflicts during the second half of the 20th century – Stefano Rosso observes how Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998) can be interpreted as the effect of the Vietnamization of the Second World War. However, the unequivocal moral status of the war to Nazism has always remained a crystallized feature of its representations, as opposed to several texts and films about Vietnam, which contend the legitimacy of the war in Indochina.

³ Quite interestingly, Donald E. Pease identifies the immediate aftermath of the Second World War as the beginning of what he defines as the “new American exceptionalism” (Pease 2009).

war, considering him responsible for the World conflict. Although the historical framework of the film is clarified from the very beginning, several narrative tropes strike the viewer as they deliberately emerge from a World War Two-related culture. This presence is particularly evident in two of the villains, scientist Dr. Isabel Maru (her alter ego is Doctor Poison), and German General Erich Ludendorff.⁴ The latter is a high-rank officer who aspires at the ultimate German victory in the war, and to do so, he encourages the scientist to develop a secret weapon that is capable of destroying the Allies: doctor Maru works on a deadly mustard gas with which to bomb the enemy's trenches. She also provides Ludendorff with a particular toxin that is able to enhance temporarily his human body and transform him into an experimental *Übermensch*. These tropes are evidently inspired by classic representations of the Second World War produced from the 1940s and in the following decades: on this note, *Captain America* could be considered as one of the most comprehensive examples, considering the way it portrays science and enhanced humans, not only iconic Steve Rogers but also his nemesis, Red Skull.

As episodic as it may seem, *Wonder Woman* constitutes one of the latest reformulations of the Second World War in US pop culture and it is the peak of a long, recent tradition that has vehemently re-emerged within the cinematic field, which encompasses a wide variety of films about the conflict such as *The Pianist* (2002), *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), *Inglorious Bastards* (2009), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Fury* and *Unbroken* (2014), *Dunkirk* (2017), and several others.

Comics and graphic narratives do not differ from this trend, in fact, the history of comics about World War Two is articulated and divisible in different stages (moving from *The Spirit*, *Captain America*, *Superman*, to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, for example), each of which has contributed to enrich a wide imaginary of the conflict, whose relevance continues to contaminate and define new graphic narratives, through features that re-emerge, distorted or modified according to the new cultural chronological context. In this sense, the intertwining of the representation of World War Two and the history of US comics is generational: the first wave of war comics was oftentimes produced by

⁴ The character results as a highly fictionalized version of Erich Friederich Wilhelm Ludendorff (1865-1837), German general in the World War One and, later on, one of the theorists of the "Stab-in-the-back doctrine," which imputed the defeat of the German Reich to an internal enemy of the nation, such as Marxists and Jews. In the first volume of his groundbreaking trilogy, *Berlin: City of Stones* (2000), Jason Lutes portrays postwar Germany and the socio-economic environment in which this kind of narratives quickly spread out, leading to the establishment of the Nazi Party.

cartoonists that had a direct experience of the conflict, especially on the front,⁵ while the second and more complex phase of representation of the war – epitomized by Spiegelman – was depicted by the so-called generation after, that is, by the sons and daughters of people that had experienced the conflict directly. Yet, the paradigmatic and mythic narrative of World War Two has created the conditions for an expansion of the imagination and imagery that has trespassed the borders of the postmemorial generation and flowed into a third-generational level of remediation and reinvention.

The existence of an immense archive of recent comics about World War Two leads to a set of inevitably rhetorical questions: is World War Two still relevant? How can its persistence be explained in contemporary pop culture? Should World War Two still be considered as the narrative and cultural war model for the twenty-first century? Why has World War Two not been supplanted by more contemporary and longer wars, such as the Cold War or the War on Terror? On the one hand, temporal distance determines a broader understanding of the historical events and their cultural, political, and ethical repercussions on the Western culture; on the other hand, for the atrocities that were perpetrated (not only the Holocaust but also the explosion of the first two atomic bombs), World War Two represents a unique turning point of the contemporary age. For these generic reasons and several more, one of the main products of contemporary media – particularly of comics – about World War Two is a mode of representation more than a model, which is the result of a multi-layered imagination of the war, rooted in historical records and contaminated and remediated by post-generational cultural tropes. This claim cannot prescind from Marianne Hirsch's well-known notion of postmemory, however, the reading here proposed will attempt to transcend the mechanism of a post-generational relation to the events, strictly activated within familial bonds, and focus instead on a transverse leaking of the World War Two collective memory to a generation beyond the generation after, composed of people “who were not actually there” (Hirsch 2012, 3), and who are not related to people who were actually there.

In light of the transversality that this essay's standpoint requires, Alison Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory seems to be preferable for the present debate: in particular, World War Two will be discussed in contemporary war comics as the result of a “new form of cultural memory” which emerges “at the interface between a persona and a historical narrative of the past.” What

⁵ For example, Jack Kirby participated in the liberation of a concentration camp and many other cartoonists served in the US army, such as Bernie Klein, who died at war, and Bill Everett, one of the creators of *Daredevil*. See Nicholas Yanes 2009.

Landsberg means is that a “person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event which he or she did not live” (2004, 2). Landsberg also stresses the fundamental contribution that pop culture media provide to this process: “Mass culture makes particular memories more widely available so that people who have no ‘natural’ claim to them might nevertheless incorporate them into their own archive of experience” (2004, 9). Or, to put it differently,⁶ “the turn to mass culture [...] has made what was once considered a group’s private memory available to a much broader public. In this process, memories have ceased to belong exclusively to a particular group and instead have become part of a common public domain” (2004, 11). The broadening of this domain interests both temporal and spatial coordinates, a reason that justifies the choice of targeting two “third-generational” World War Two comics (published from the 1990s on), produced by non-American cartoonists, outside from any logic of cultural and national mystification of World War Two.

Although with some differences, Ennis’ and Gillen’s sagas propose two different reformulations of the main narrative tropes that had emerged from the popular imagination of the Second World War. Garth Ennis’ *Bloody Mary* is a four-issue series and it narrates a story set in a dystopic 1999 in which the Second World War starts again: “This time, the Franco-German-dominated community became a superstate” and England joined once again “The United States and once again survives a battle of Britain” (Ennis 1996, 10). Weaponry evolved so much in both parties that war has determined a status of belligerent balance, and the story starts presenting both parties’ race for a new form of weapon, a parasite that is capable of transforming a human body into a stronger and more enduring organism whose structure is human but whose nervous system is animal. In this way, not only are the human hosts stronger, but their nervous system prevents them from feeling physical pain. Mary is a US secret agent whose mission is to prevent the Nazi superstate’s acquisition of the parasite, which would grant them military supremacy over the Allies and the ultimate victory in the conflict. The only existing examples are owned by Anderton, a mercenary working for the Nazis, and a former member of a task force that Mary herself had been part of. After she had left the squad, Anderton killed her parents. Soon enough, Bloody

⁶ Concerning graphic narratives, Ross J. Wilson goes in a similar direction and argues that “Memory in this assessment is mediated, but this is done by agents who use monuments, memorials, commemorative practices, novels, film, and theatre as vehicles or devices for expression, not as directives for comprehension” (2015, 87).

Mary is required to find the parasites and discovers Anderton's position, finally getting the chance to take her revenge.

2013 Kieron Gillen's *Über* and *Über Invasion* present a very similar narrative scenario, yet they are set in an alternative 1945, that is, not in a different dystopic future but in an alternate past. The story begins as the Third Reich was historically about to capitulate to the Allies, when a secret weapon was discovered: a chemical formula that was able to enhance some chosen human beings called "battleships," to the point of making them not immortal nor invulnerable, but capable of massively killing entire armies or destroying any sort of weapons. The saga relates about a spy who succeeds in sneaking the formula to the Allies, who in turn start working on their own battleships, continuing the war on a different level of hostility where the balance of power is restored, at least until *Über Invasion*, which envisions a German invasion of the United States, starting with the destruction of Washington D.C.

Two of the fundamental common elements that characterize *Bloody Mary* and *Über* are their strong focus on race and biology combined with weaponry. In both storylines race and the principle of supremacy between certain kinds of human beings on others tend to play the most significant part. The perpetual quest for a superior form of humans constitutes *per se* a form of transposition and remediation of Hitler's catastrophic vision of a purely Aryan German Reich, free from any contamination deriving from different ethnicities. In both graphic narratives, the implications of this superiority affect the military dimension: to have the best (in)humans means to win the war. Such a narrative choice does not imply any considerable change from some of the most well-known American comics, both as war comics and golden age comics are concerned. Quite the contrary: the centrality of physical (and moral) superiority constitutes part of a tradition along the history of American comics and originated in the first half of the 20th century through eugenics, when, starting after World War One, "Physical weakness was perceived as not only unpatriotic but also as a sign of cowardice" (Hack 2009, 80): the most famous superheroes of the Marvel universe and some of the DC one are non-humans (for example, Superman and Wonder Woman) or metahumans (such as Captain America, the X-Men – also defined as enhanced humans –, Hulk, ect.), and the majority of them were employed as

weapons either against Nazi Germany⁷ or the Soviet Union.⁸ In this sense, the proximity between very recent graphic narratives and the tradition is quite self-evident; what seems to require further investigation is rather their operational mechanism: World War Two functions as a deictic, namely as an element whose nuclear meanings and sense remain unaltered but which are able to adapt to a different narrative and historical frame and a different target context so as to change accordingly. In other terms, what I contend here is the impossibility for contemporary-pop-culture representations of the Second World War not to be influenced by the cultural environment in which they are produced. This condition triggers two effects on the cultural meaning of World War Two in the third generational age: first the extraction of its original narratives from its original contexts, and, second, their representation into different cultural frames which produces the infiltration of new elements inspired by different contingencies that affect the already existing collective and universal “physical and mental landscapes” of the war (Kaplan 2011, 1).

One of the most evident examples of this extraction can be recognized in the trope of the “secret weapon,” which is present and evident in both the works here analyzed. Historically, being one of the first large-scale wars, World War One had functioned as a cultural paradigm, considering that it provided the occasion for the debut of several new weapons (tanks, flamethrowers, gas, etc.). However, grounded on this template trope, the cultural heritage of the Second World War built a stronger paradigm of the secret weapon: the atomic bomb, which both the United States and Germany had worked on in order to synthesize and win the war. *Bloody Mary* offers a clear example of the extraction process of a symbolic trope of World War Two, and its infiltration into a new scenario: in the very beginning of the mini-series, an atomic bomb is reported to have exploded in Birmingham, thus ending the Second Battle of England, as we read “Birmingham paid the price” (Ennis 1996, 11). The image simply shows a huge mushroom cloud that dominates the panel, without other significant details; interestingly enough,

⁷ As Brian E. Hack argues, “As it was well-known that the creation of the ‘superman’ [...] was on the agenda of the Third Reich, this preemptive plan to create an American counterpart begs the questions of how the creation of [...] an army of super-soldiers differed philosophically and ethically from the Nazi program” (2009, 82).

⁸ This is particularly characteristic of Captain America. Steve Rogers’ alter ego was genetically created as a weapon to be deployed against the Nazis. However, once World War Two finished, the propagandist trajectory entered a decline due to the lack of an enemy to fight, and Cap’s mission was interrupted as he fell in the North Atlantic Ocean and remained frozen. From the late 1940s to the early 1950s, Captain America was “rebooted” and re-deployed against a new enemy of America, communism. However, this revival was not as successful as the first version of the character (Scott 2007, Walton 2009, and Di Paolo 2011).

no explicit mention of the atomic bomb is provided. Combined with a veiled tagline, the visual void only exposes the reader to the aura of the event. The cause of this authorial choice might be dual: on the one hand, the explosion is one of the preparatory components of the narrative framework. On the other hand, the choice may be due to the cultural panorama of the epoch in which the series was published: being released few years after the end of the Cold War, it could be inferred that the author considers the popular awareness of the risk of an atomic war as standardized and a “normal” part of the order of things in a bipolar world. In other terms, the endemic fear of atomic warfare that had permeated Western culture before the end of the Cold War ends up obliterated and does not constitute a taboo as before, to the point that its reference can only be alluded to and its significance completed by the reader through the process that Scott McCloud famously defines as “closure” (1993, 63).

Yet, despite its content, the narrative function of the secret weapon remains untouched. The authorial silence about the atomic bomb and the focus on new biological weapons reflect the adaptation of a well-known pattern to the different epoch in which the comics are produced. Ennis transposes the fear of a new weapon whose potential and consequences are unknown into a new cultural moment, namely concentrating on biological threats that have become more and more urgent after the conclusion of the Cold War era.⁹ The racial aspect follows a similar pattern: if, traditionally, superheroes and enhanced humans came from other planets, or were providential results of mistakes (Hack 2009) – probably with the exception of Captain America, whose genesis was premeditated (Kripal 2011 and Fawaz 2016) – in *Bloody Mary* and *Über* superhumans are the scope of large scale scientific experiments that completely lack any moral component but only respond to the military logic. In *Über*, the Nazi officer in charge of the scientific warfare explicitly claims that it had been necessary to sacrifice thousands of test subjects before finding one that was able to host the formula. In parallel, when the secret formula sneaks to the Allies, large scale experimentation starts and only randomly the first subject fit to become a “battleship” is found, without showing a particular predisposition – biological nor moral – for the enhancement process.

Garth Ennis explicitly establishes a connection between biology and weaponry during the final confrontation between Bloody Mary and her enemy, Anderton, both enhanced by the parasite. Mary, who had swallowed a parasite

⁹ In particular, see Wheelis, Rószka, and Dando 2006, and Smith 2014.

only in order to be able to fight Anderton, asks information about the organism. Anderton explains that:

The Chinese called it the Blood Dragon. [...] It's a kind of biological supercharger. It was designed to keep its host alive [...]. It grows a new nervous system alongside that of the host – but one that can instantly adapt to loss of tissue, or even limbs. It produces vast quantities of adrenaline and oxygen for the host body, feeding with the organs which thus become redundant [...]. It even has a basic brain in case the host loses theirs. Motor functions and even partial sentience will remain. His body it occupies will effectively never die. (Ennis 1996, 84)

Right after the scientific description of the Blood Dragon, Anderton exclaims, “It’s a War-Winner” (1996, 85). Although the storyline of Mary’s revenge interlaces with the broader picture of the war she is fighting, the personal trajectory tends to maintain a dominant position in the textual economy of the mini-series.

The relationship between biological secret weapons and traditional military materiel constitutes one of the largest narrative components that characterize Gillen’s saga. In issue #1, when scientist-spy Stephanie is crossing the German lines in order to give the secret formula to the Allies, she is escorted by a Panzermensch (an enhanced human, weaker than a battleship) who is not aware of the imminent treason; as they talk, he asks “So is the problem military or to do with the science?” (Gillen 2013a, 16), precisely locating the center of the saga over the relationship between weaponry and biology. The entire military dimension of *Über* simply stages a war based on the superiority of some weapons (Panzermensch over “normal” humans, or Battleships over Panzermensch). Whereas the first few issues focus on the German side, from issues #4 and #5, the Anglo-American side of the war is presented. Particularly, in issue #5, a British officer instructs a regiment of English equivalent to Panzermensch about how to fight and warns them in case they met battleships, such as Sieglinde, the only woman battleship, and he claims: “Battleship Sieglinde is beyond your capabilities. If she engages, retreat, immediately” (2013d, 8). This example of the military logic provided by *Über* also constitutes an example of the function of palimpsest that World War Two plays in second and third-generational comics: the superiority of battleships can be interpreted as an alternative transposition of several other products of the relationship between weaponry and science that historically characterized the conflict. To put it simply, the British officer’s command to retreat in front of a more powerful weapon reminds of instructions that American Sherman tank crews were given in case they encountered a

German Tiger Panzer, or when American P-40 aircrafts confronted German Messerschmitts or Japanese Zeros, in both cases, higher class military machinery.¹⁰

In narrative terms, both *Bloody Mary* and *Über* stage a common trope that is structured on the traditional template of previous World War Two comics as part of the Western literary tradition (from epic poetry onward), the duel. Just as Golden Age superhero comics depicted the opposition between heroes and their nemesis, so contemporary representations of World War Two tend to isolate symbolic models in the struggle between the good and the evil; both world wars are condensed in a binary representative structure numerically minimized against the background of two global conflicts. Whereas in *Bloody Mary* the war is intertwined with the subplot of personal revenge, in *Über* the unicity of the battleships (three supersoldiers on the German side and two on the American one) responds both to narrative and ideological logics: Kieron Gillen and Caanan White stage a total war and dedicate several panels to the representation of a large number of soldiers which require personifications in order to construct the reader's involvement. In addition to that, this form of reduction of protagonists reflects the unicity that the superhuman nature implies. However, both the narrative and ideological aspects show a prosecution of the dominant tradition of the American War comics.¹¹

In conclusion, Garth Ennis and Kieron Gillen provide examples that convey a representation of the past which is bluntly future-oriented, namely, built on narrative details that belong to different future epochs but that are structured on a narrative template deeply rooted in the original historical and cultural scenario. In the light of these contemporary reformulations of World War Two, one could question whether the original conflict is postponed in "days of future past," or contemporary elements are anticipated into a past-oriented future. Clearly enough, the answer might encompass both readings, considering that elements from the future are able to modify the representation of World War Two and, at

¹⁰ The supremacy of the German military manufacturing has provided notable content for popular culture representations of the Second World War, again in cinema, where the imbalance of power offers the possibility for a narrative upgrade of the protagonists' mission: that is the case of Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor* (2001), Anthony Hemingway's *Red Tails* (2012), and David Ayer's *Fury* (2014). On the military efficiency of the German army, see Thomas 2002 and Hull 2005. A significant example in war comics was also written by Garth Ennis: *Dreaming Eagles* (2016), relating to the 332nd Expeditionary Operations Group – also known as the Tuskegee Airmen (as in Anthony Hemingway's film).

¹¹ Very few famous cases exist in which this binary scheme is disrupted within a military framework, that is, where the individual is subordinate to a dehumanized representation of the war front and they both depict the French front during World War One: Jacques Tardi's *It Was the War of the Trenches* (1993) and Joe Sacco's *The Great War* (2014).

the same time, World War Two can function as an adequate narrative stage where to project future historical preoccupations.

The template mode that characterizes several re-interpretations of the Second World War until very recent episodes constitutes the most relevant aspect in the present discourse: the fact that a narrative model has underlain war graphic narratives for more than fifty years indicates the unique nature of the conflict in the way it has been culturally recorded, circulated and acquired by multi-generational audiences. The evocative power of this trajectory does not have equals in the representation of any other conflict, not even World War One, whose paradigm was, in fact, overcome soon after the breakout of World War Two. For this reason, the present essay has intended to target and examine the shadow of the Second World War in its third-generational prosthetic memorial reformulations. Although both Ennis and Gillen's works seem to be constructed on the same textual and partially historical foundations, the tropes they most consistently resort to in order to develop their cultural infiltrations are the most oblique ones rather than those that contributed to strengthening the mythological status of the conflict.

Due to their multifaceted angulations, the trope of the secret weapon as well as the ethnic element thoroughly problematize any possible contemporary reinvention of World War Two: even when explicitly referring to historical events, both narrative aspects show their non-univocal nature and, as a consequence, they do not reflect any idealist myth of the war, but rather universalize and readapt to different historical contexts a critical understanding of what the mythology of the Second World War has been. According to Pauwels, victors "certainly did not emerge with clean hands from this "crusade" against fascism, as the names Dresden, Katyn, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki remind us" (2002, 268). Certainly, both sagas depict the Nazis as "an enemy of unspeakable evil" (Zinn 1980, 382), but their critical approach does not look as "systematically sanitized," as Paul Fussell would put it (1989, 267), but consistently perceivable as they controvert the Manichean polarization between Good and Evil which encrusts the dominant discourses on the Second World War in the Western culture.

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