

# **The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice**

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Affection is what we gratify by missing, valuing and remembering the dead, but the insatiable desire for grief – a desire which makes us wail and howl – is just as contemptible as hedonistic indulgence, despite the notion that it is forgivable because, although it may be contemptible, it is accompanied not by any pleasure gained from the desire, but rather by distress and pain (Plutarch 2008: 3).

## **Introduction**

The archetypal character of the retributive antihero – one who makes his own rules and follows his own conscience – is a familiar figure in mass culture, appearing in film, television, video games, and comics. This character represents the frustrations of millions of people who feel powerless and who fantasize about striking back at their enemies, be they real or imagined. This essay looks at one of the most prominent vigilantes in contemporary pop culture, the Punisher, and explores the relationship between Punisher comics, and vigilante entertainment more generally, to time-honored debates over justice, morality, and the law. In this essay I will argue that the Punisher represents an inherently political worldview, one that values emotion over reason and unchecked anger over due process. The character makes the case for the notion that white-hot rage, channeled into the right kind of

self-generated military campaign, has redemptive social value. For the Punisher, anger is not a feral emotion that should be expelled from the political or legal realm. Instead, it is a dissolvent that allows us to apprehend things as they really are.

The Punisher is one of a small number of prominent Marvel heroes to be introduced in the aftermath of the so-called Silver Age. Most of the company's high-profile characters were created either during the early 1940s (such as Captain America, Sub-Mariner), or the early 1960s (such as Spider-Man, the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four). In contrast, the Punisher entered the Marvel universe in the mid-1970s, at a time when the vigilante figure was flourishing on the movie screen and in pulp fiction (Sandbrook 2011: 53-57). From the outset, the character's relentless war on crime offered 'an alternative location for discussing the nature of justice' (Greenfield et al 2010: 198). While Marvel heroes often brush up against political questions, the Punisher is an intrinsically political character. His life story, and his comic book stories, offers a firm rebuke to the idea that post-Vietnam America could ever hope to achieve 'a more perfect union'. The Punisher not only embodies the serial vigilante narrative in comic book form but articulates a transgressive logic that pits one man's natural law against the discourses and practices of the modern legal and political order.

The Punisher made his first appearance in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129 (February 1974). Gerry Conway, an up-and-coming writer who was given responsibility for one of Marvel's flagship titles the previous year, came up with the idea of a trigger-happy extremist whose methods offered a stark contrast to Spider-Man's sweet-natured humanism. Where Spider-Man often tried reasoning with villains, and left criminals hanging from streetlamps in spider-fluid for the police to find, the Punisher embraced a strict shoot-to-kill policy. As he insisted in his inaugural appearance, 'I kill only those who *deserve* killing...It's not something I *like* doing, it's simply something that has to be done' (Conway and Andru 1974: 3, 11).<sup>1</sup> The issue's cover art, by Russ Andru, underscored the fact that the Punisher was different from other costumed adventurers. Rather than sporting a colorful outfit,

the Punisher was garbed in a black unitard that featured an enormous skull image and a fully stocked ammunition belt. The white boots and white gloves he wore neatly symbolized the binary, black-and-white nature of his thinking, and added a somewhat implausible note of visual contrast. Seen peering through the scope of a high-caliber rifle, he was the personification of the grim reaper. John Romita, who had previously designed costumes for several Spider-Man adversaries, including the Rhino, the Shocker, and the Prowler, developed the character's visuals; Andru was the first of many Marvel artists to tinker with Romita's basic framework. Armed with righteous outrage, heavy artillery, and a distinctive costume, the Punisher's arrival suggested that the sunny optimism of sixties-era comic books was coming under assault.

Over the past few decades the Punisher has appeared in movies (1989, 2004, 2008), video games (1990, 1993, 2005, 2009), and on dozens of licensed products, from t-shirts, decals, and action figures to key rings, belt buckles, and shot glasses. Despite his multi-media appearances, he is probably best known as a comic book character. Since his inception the Punisher has appeared in eleven ongoing series, twenty-five limited series, thirty-three one-shots, eleven crossovers, and four graphic novels. In addition, a futuristic version of the character appeared in the 34-issue series *The Punisher 2099*. Many but not all of the Punisher's comic book appearances have been collected into paperback and (sometimes) hardbound volumes. To date, the character has been featured in nearly 750 comic books and around 50 bound volumes. He has battled mobsters, hit men, drug lords, biker gangs, human traffickers, child pornographers, government conspirators, white supremacists, white-collar criminals, corrupt police officers, rogue intelligence agents, religiously inspired terrorists, criminal psychopaths, and, occasionally, other costumed adventurers. If the Punisher is not quite as culturally ubiquitous as Spider-Man or the X-Men, the character has become one of the durable icons of the comics subculture.

For the first decade of the Punisher's existence, he mainly served as a secondary character in Spider-Man stories that made a point of criticizing his tactics; rarely did he appear as the main actor in his own

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stories. With the success of the pivotal *Circle of Blood* mini-series in the mid-1980s, he vaulted into the spotlight, and since that time he has played a leading role on the Marvel stage. Indeed, superhero fans often cite the Punisher's rise as a prime example of the so-called 'grim and gritty' sensibility that flourished in the wake of *Watchmen* (1986-1987) and *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) (Scott 2009: 127). Given his pull in the marketplace, it is not surprising that Punisher stories have been written and illustrated by some of the industry's most popular creators including Garth Ennis, Mike Baron, Greg Rucka, Howard Chaykin, Steve Dillon, and Matt Fraction. As a result, the Punisher has arguably become the most famous murderous vigilante in Anglophone comics.

Unlike other superheroes, the Punisher exists in a state of permanent rage, which he masks behind a steely, single-minded resolve. He is a visual metaphor for an extralegal fury that is tempered only by a calculated desire for revenge. In this respect, he is reminiscent of the 'fanatic' as described by Voltaire in his famous encyclopedia entry:

Laws are yet more powerless against these paroxysms of rage. To oppose laws to cases of such description would be like reading a decree of council to a man in a frenzy. The persons in question are fully convinced that the Holy Spirit which animates and fills them is above all laws; that their own enthusiasm is, in fact, the only law which they are bound to obey (Voltaire 1824: 172).

The Punisher's 'paroxysms of rage' can be traced back to his origin story, which was first told in *Marvel Preview* #2 (Conway and Andru 1975). Toward the conclusion of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129, by Gerry Conway (writer) and Ross Andru (artist), Spider-Man asks the Punisher 'what's this whole *kick* you're on? You said you were a marine – so how come you're fighting over *here*?'. The Punisher responds, 'That's my business, super-hero, not *yours*,' adding, 'Maybe when I'm dead it'll *mean* something'. Reflecting on this exchange, Spider-Man reasonably concludes, 'that man's got problems that make *mine* look like a birthday party' (Conway and Andru 1974: 30). The Punisher's 'business' was finally revealed to readers a year later in a thirty-two page black-and-white story written by Gerry Conway and drawn by Tony DeZuniga.

During a lull in the action the Punisher thinks about how ‘there’s a *war* going on in this country – between citizen and *criminal* – and the citizens are losing – just as my family lost’. The narrative flashes back to the day he lost his wife and children who were gunned down after stumbling across a mob hit in Central Park. ‘It’s good to be home,’ says Frank Castle to his wife as they enjoy a sunny day in Manhattan’s most famous green space. ‘Get *out* of here, honey! *Run!*!’ he shouts, as four nattily dressed gangsters start firing on the happy family. ‘I think I’ve been – *shot* – Honey. Don’t worry – nothing – serious? Honey? Answer m – *no*. Dear lord, *no*. *Noooooo*.’ In a close-up he says to himself, ‘After a thing like that, I suppose a man *does* go – mad’ (Conway and DeZuniga 1975: 8).

A number of writers have subsequently fleshed out this bleak origin story. They have added a wealth of biographical details, such as the fact that the character was born to a family of Sicilian ancestry in Queens; that he seriously considered joining the priesthood; and that he served three tours of duty as a Marine in Vietnam. His family name is Castiglione, but he changed it to Castle in order to re-enlist. For his military service he received the Medal of Honor, the Navy Cross, multiple Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, and Purple Hearts, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom; clearly, he was one of the most capable soldiers of his generation. Frank Castle was always a moralist with an itchy trigger finger, but he needed a catalyst to transform himself into a domestic warrior. The murder of his family provided that catalyst. Once his campaign of vengeance began, he jettisoned his civilian identity and assumed the role of the Punisher on a full-time basis. He does not require a mask or a secret identity, because he has no family to protect. Nor does he struggle to repress his inner demons, as Bruce Banner does vis-à-vis the Hulk. The Punisher occasionally thinks about his dead wife (Maria), and his dead children (Lisa and Frank Jr.), but he mostly thinks about his job, which is killing people.

The Punisher is a case study in vengeance-based entertainment. After all, vengeance is not only a mode of behavior; it is also a genre. Scholars of genre have tended to neglect vengeance in favor of such

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categories as science fiction, horror, western, and romance. But it is an audience-generating genre just the same. Revenge provides the organizing principle of countless movies, television dramas, paperbacks, comics, and video games. As a ready-made source of archetypes, plots, and scenarios, the vengeance narrative implies certain expectations, tropes, and preoccupations. One of its recurrent motifs is the status and legitimacy of the law, both as text and as embodied in specific occupations and individuals, such as judges, lawyers, and police officers. The genre fixates on our obligations to the law, our relationship to the law, and whether, when, and under what conditions acting outside of the law might be considered acceptable. Admittedly, the genre's tough-guy exterior famously conceals an underlying romanticism, and a tendency toward nostalgia, and can thus lapse into melodrama. As Leonard Cassuto has insightfully pointed out, 'inside every crime story is a sentimental narrative that's trying to come out' (2009: 7). But the dominant emotional register in most vengeance stories, including the Punisher's, is anger. The revenge formula thus explores the roots, nature, uses, and downside of unleashed rage. In so doing it inevitably confronts legal and political concerns to an extent that is typically not the case for other popular storyworld engines.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of vengeance stories. In the first, a terrible injustice is done, and a brave or possibly foolhardy individual, or small group, seeks to make things right. In these stories the hero typically returns to his family and/or neighbors, and the status quo is restored. Although they are rarely described as such, the Harry Potter books offer a good example of this kind of vengeance story, albeit relayed over seven volumes. In these books the catalyst is the murder of Harry's parents, and through a series of adventures Harry and his friends avenge his parents' murderer, Lord Voldemort, and then go on to enjoy their lives. Vengeance stories that close on a happy note suggest that while a traumatic event may temporarily justify extralegal action, normality can eventually be reestablished.

In the second type of vengeance story, a terrible injustice inspires the hero, or, more accurately, the antihero, to embark on an unending

spree of violence. In these kinds of stories there is no happy ending, at least not for the main character. The second type of vengeance story is particularly well suited for serial-based formats, such as comic books, television series, movie franchises, and paperback series, where the open-ended nature of the anti-heroic quest allows for endless variations on the same basic stories. The Punisher is one of the more commercially successful iterations of this second kind of vengeance narrative. As such, the Punisher is an outlier in the superhero business, not only because he lacks any kind of special powers, or scientific aptitude, but also because he conflates retribution with justice. To survive, Castle relies on his wits, training, weaponry, and sense of determination. His longevity is somewhat paradoxical in that he navigates an environment populated by mutants, aliens, scientific geniuses, god-like beings, and secret armies. The fact that he flourishes in a world as crowded, dangerous, and technologically advanced as the Marvel universe is almost miraculous, which may be one reason why the character has been killed off more than once, albeit in 'imaginary stories' that do not affect the character's 'continuity'.

### Scholarly Readings

As Peter Coogan has usefully argued, the Punisher can be considered a superhero because he is a costumed character with a mission who inhabits a superhero universe. Building on the work of William Kitteredge and Steven Krauzer, who argue that heavily armed 'aggressors' like the Punisher operate as an 'active force for moral order' (1978: xxix), Coogan writes:

Within the Marvel universe, he is fairly clearly a superhero, but his allegiance with the aggressor hero-type pushes him out of the center of the superhero formula. As he became popular in the 1980s and was featured multiple series, the Punisher switched back and forth between the aggressor formula and the superhero genres depending on whether he appeared in his own comics or made guest appearances in superhero stories, that is his definition as a superhero varied depending upon the concatenation of conventions in any particular story (2006: 54-55).

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Coogan's monograph is only one of several recently published books and edited collections that have brought a new level of sophistication to the study of superheroes (Hatfield, Heer, and Worcester 2013). While the Punisher is not the main object of inquiry for this new secondary literature, the character has inspired in-depth analyses by Marc DiPaolo, Andrew Getzfeld, Lorrie Palmer, and Cord Scott. The character that Grant Morrison has described as 'the template for a new generation of cookie-cutter no-compromise superthugs' (Morrison 2011: 217) is likely to generate further scrutiny as the study of superheroes gains further academic attention.

An obvious way to approach the character is through the lens of psychology. Andrew Getzfeld, an expert in abnormal human behavior, asks 'what would it be like to have Frank Castle lying on the proverbial couch?' 'We would first consider,' he says, 'the presence of a Personality Disorder, specifically Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD)'. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (fourth edition), a person with ASPD 'needs to violate the rights of others through deceit, repeated lies, or aggression'; repeatedly performs 'behaviors that are considered as grounds for arrest'; is 'repeatedly aggressive by getting involved with numerous physical fights and assaults'; and 'will demonstrate a lack of regard for his/her own safety' as well as the safety of others. In addition, this person 'will demonstrate a lack of remorse' (Getzfeld 2008: 167-168). While it seems reasonable to conclude that the Punisher fits this diagnosis, ASPD is usually linked to childhood trauma, and Getzfeld rightly notes that 'we need to know quite a bit about his childhood years and we do not have that information' (169). Treating the Punisher would be difficult, as ASPD patients 'tend to be recidivists' and 'rarely come into treatment voluntarily'. Thus Getzfeld suggests that the Punisher's 'prognosis for successful treatment ... is poor' (172-173).

Another approach focuses on the character's relationship to the Marvel universe and the sharp contrast he provides with other superheroes. Cord Scott argues that the Punisher 'represents the antithesis of Captain America' (2009: 125). While the Captain favors



nonviolence, cooperates with the authorities, and endlessly proclaims his faith in the American system – not only verbally, but also via his costume – the Punisher is a lone wolf type who embraces a ‘cavalier attitude towards due process and civil liberties’ (126). Not surprisingly, Captain America is generally repulsed by the Punisher’s *weltanschauung* and has referred to him as a ‘fascist’, noting for example in one story the similarity between the ‘Nazi’s predominant colors (black) and symbology (skulls) and the Punisher’s uniform’ (126). In *Punisher War Journal: A Marvel Comics Event* (2007), Matt Fraction has the Captain call the Punisher ‘an animal’ as well as ‘insane’ (131) which echoes arguments made by Daredevil, Spider-Man, and other Marvel characters in stories from the 1970s and early 1980s. His appearance in other heroes’ titles draws a sharp contrast between law-abiding heroism and the Punisher’s extralegal methods. In his own titles, however, his aggressive approach is routinely celebrated. This allows Marvel to simultaneously distance itself from the character and at the same time appeal to consumers who prefer uncompromising vigilantism to standard superhero narratives.

The relationship between the superhero vigilante and earlier genres is insightfully explored by Lorrie Palmer. Rather than comparing the Punisher to other high-profile Marvel characters, Palmer situates the character in relation to film noir and the Western. ‘In each case,’ she says,

traditional forces of authority are inadequate, leaving the protagonist to enter into direct confrontation with the hostile foes arrayed against him (and a society unable to do so on its own). He must negotiate the shifting dynamics of male power and often adapt the villain’s dark modus as his own in order to defeat him and gain vengeance and justice (2007: 194).

Like antiheroes in noir movies, and the grittier sort of Western, the Punisher ‘exists on the periphery of both the community and the wilderness’ (Thomas Schatz qtd Palmer 2007: 202) where he is likely to remain until he dies. It therefore turns out he is one of a long line of armed men ‘who has to pick up the mantle of justice when regular

law enforcement fails' (Palmer 2007: 192). What makes the Punisher exceptional is not his generic way of life, but rather the scale and duration of his campaign of violence. Few private detectives or six-gun shooters could possibly compete with the Punisher's record of achievement in this area. An editor at Marvel recently revealed that between the mid-1970s and 2011 the character was responsible for the deaths of 48,502 people (Manning 2011: online). Even the Executioner, the mobster slaughtering aggressor introduced by paperback writer Don Pendleton in 1969, whose commercial triumph helped inspire Gerry Conway to introduce an analogous character into the Marvel universe, has not inflicted this level of murderousness over the long arc of his career. While Palmer helpfully emphasizes the extent to which the Punisher builds on preexisting genre conventions, she understates the degree to which the character is *sui generis* even within the context of serial vigilante entertainment.

Scholarly commentary on the Punisher has thus addressed the character's psychological make-up, his role and status in the Marvel universe, and his relationship to earlier storytelling traditions. To date, only one writer has explored the character's *politics*. Marc DiPaolo locates the Punisher in relation to stories about Vietnam vets such as Rambo who 'brought the war overseas back home' (2011: 119) as well as to the heroes of such films as *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974). According to DiPaolo, most Punisher stories 'strive for a realism that appears to endorse the Punisher's actions, and a radical form of conservatism, that is quite disturbing'. He finds

a racist overtone to the comic as a whole and, no matter how many Waspish U.S. senators he assassinates for political corruption, the Punisher seems most ecstatic when he breaks into a warehouse and begins machine gunning legions of Italians, Japanese ninjas, and non-white foes with gold teeth (131).

The Punisher, he concludes, belongs 'to the same disturbing pop culture family as 1970s and 1980s slasher movies, exploitation crime films, and rape revenge narratives. All were inspired by the Vietnam War and endorsed a conservative worldview'. That said, DiPaolo

reserves his harshest criticism for the audience, rather than the character and his creators:

there is something troubling about a person who adores exploitation stories and rape revenge stories to the exclusion of other kinds of narratives, and who does not take an ironic or detached look at the reactionary values embedded in these tales (136-137).

The concerns that DiPaolo raises are important ones. The character was indeed incubated in the ‘backlash culture’ of the 1970s and 1980s, and his *modus operandi* offers an implicit rebuke to countercultural fantasies concerning peace, love, and brotherhood. However, terms like ‘conservative’, ‘reactionary’ or ‘racist’ do not quite apply. As his writers have consistently emphasized, the Punisher is indifferent to ordinary political discourse. If he reads the newspaper, it’s for the crime stories. He doesn’t canvas for candidates or listen to talk radio. The only time he mentions the political system is when he bitterly and sweepingly condemns it – and these rants usually last for a single word balloon before he returns to the task at hand.

The question of the Punisher and whiteness is similarly worth exploring. There have certainly been single issues and multi-issue story arcs that pitted our Italian-American antihero against Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and African-American villains, at least one of whom sported gold teeth (a sadistic mercenary named Barracuda, who eventually gets his face blown off). It would be easy to comb through a pile of Punisher comics and find panels that would seem tasteless and offensive if they were projected onto a large screen. But the Punisher has never been marketed as a paragon of virtue, and some of his own writers have arguably treated the character as sociopath. His task is to model the logic, sources, and consequences of vengeance. For this reason, his writers have always insisted that Castle is an equal-opportunity avenger, and the sheer range of villainy that has been showcased in his comics is remarkable. While it is not clear how we would measure the ‘ecstasy’ experienced by such a dour mass murderer, I do not think we can take DiPaolo’s claim for granted that the Punisher prefers gunning down non-white foes to Caucasians.

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The problem with DiPaolo's critique is not so much its self-congratulatory quality, but the way in which it misses the point. Dismissing the character sidesteps the issue of what the Punisher brings to the conversation. What makes the character worth thinking about are not the opinions he expresses, or the putative selectivity of his targets, but the larger argument he embodies. His entire career makes the case for the idea that anger is righteous, that it illuminates, clarifies, and cleanses, and that it belongs in the public realm. Most liberals and conservatives would accept Thomas Hobbes' notion that civil society is where the strong emotions of the state of nature give way to reason and legitimate order. Modern political thought is built on the assumption that passions, especially violent passions, are potentially destabilizing, and that the job of the law, social norms, and public institutions is to establish and protect communities where differences can be settled without recourse to blood feuds, internal war, and other forms of unsanctioned, politically illegitimate violence. For the Punisher, however, anger *is* truth. His anger allows him (he thinks) to see the world as it truly is, as a place where concepts like civil society, the state, and the law itself are tools used by bullies to inflict pain on others. His unblinking rage permits him to look past the veil of the social contract. From the Punisher's standpoint, humanity never left the state of nature. Part of the reason he's so angry is because the rest of us are so naive.

If the Punisher is a 'conservative', then, he is a conservative of an exceptionally anti-modern variety. His single-mindedness, his morbidity, and his alienation from everyday life place him outside the conventional spectrum. Perhaps the closest analogue in terms of political theory is provided by the controversial writings of German philosopher Carl Schmitt, who joined the Nazi Party in 1933 but whose theoretical framework nevertheless came under intense fire from leading fascists. Schmitt is probably best known for his 1932 essay 'The Concept of the Political' which famously argued that:

The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy...Only the

actual participants can correctly recognize, understand, and judge the concrete situation and settle the extreme case of conflict. Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent's way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's form of existence. Emotionally the enemy is easily treated as being evil and ugly, because every distinction, most of all the political, as the strongest and most intense of distinctions and categorizations, draws upon other distinctions for support (Schmitt 1976: 26-27).

Committed to waging war against his enemies, who are innumerable, the Punisher's politics, as I see them, are *rejectionist*, *retributive*, *apocalyptic*, and *cynical*. While it may not make sense to talk about 'the politics of the Punisher' in terms of elections or political parties, the character is nevertheless deeply engaged with political and juridical questions – most notably, the role that anger should play within the parameters of politics and the law.

### **Rejectionist, Retributive, Apocalyptic and Cynical**

A key facet of the Punisher's personality is that he is a rejectionist. He rejects compromise, negotiating, logrolling, deal making, easy living, and empty rhetoric. 'No. No deals ever' he says to Captain America during Marvel's Civil War storyline, while brandishing two machine guns (Fraction 2006: 30). From the outset the character was defined as an outsider, a hardliner, and a non-joiner. The opening of one of his very first stories, 'Death Sentence' (Conway and DeZuniga 1975) places him on a Wall Street rooftop, using his sniper rifle to take out the assassin who is planning to kill the politician who is giving a speech to the crowd assembled on the streets below. The Punisher muses, 'I'd received a *tip* earlier that morning – vague as to *details*, clear as to *intent*. I didn't care about the politician haranguing the crowd below – I'd had enough of his kind when I was younger and believed that sort of drivel...' (Conway and DeZuniga 1975: 4). Subsequent storylines often allowed him to toss off bitter asides; as he watches two sixties radicals walk out of prison after serving fifteen year sentences for setting off

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bombs that killed sixteen people he complains, 'The American justice system: what a farce', observing that 'They spent less than a year prison time for each of those killings' (Starlin and Wrightson 1991: 1). At the same time, he sometimes expresses doubts about his own efficacy. In *An Eye for An Eye*, he concedes that 'sometimes I lose sight of what or whom I'm fighting for' (Potts and Lee 1992: 9). Reflecting on the tenacity of crime, he sounded a rare note of despair in *Circle of Blood*:

The dream is dead in me. I can't go back. I have my mission. My war. A war I'll never win. The more I do, the worse things seem to get. A mob boss dies, someone else takes his place. Nothing changes. Not really. I can't kill all of them. I see a day, not too far off, when I'll be too slow then I'll be dead and they'll go on, and nothing will have changed (Grant and Zeck 1988: 55).

Despite these occasional misgivings, the character is basically unrelenting. His rage never diminishes; the campaign is his only solace. As he prevents Captain America from bashing in the head of a particularly corrupt Attorney General of the United States, he says, '*Lower the shield, man! Just walk away! Or you can never go back... and it's lonely as hell once you get here! There's nothing...but the cold satisfaction of punishment!*'. At this point Janson's pencils offer a close-up of the Punisher giving the barest of smiles (Chichester et al 1992: 45). His search for this 'cold satisfaction' sometimes gets him in trouble; at regular intervals he gets punched, kicked, beaten, shot, knifed, maimed, shackled, electrocuted, thrown out of airplanes, tossed out of helicopters, or pushed into piranha, shark, or alligator-infested waters. In the graphic novel *Intruder*, he is handcuffed, punched in the neck, kicked in the teeth, slapped in the face, and suffocated with a plastic bag filled with urine. Despite all this, he somehow manages to convince one of his torturers, a South Korean intelligence agent named Mr. Soon, that he's a U.S. government agent, and that the men Soon is working for are wholesale cocaine distributors. 'You must be telling the truth,' the agent concludes, 'No man could endure what you have and tell a fiction!' But Soon pays a heavy price for underestimating Castle's internal fortitude when he twists and snaps the man's neck

(Baron and Reinhold 1989: 48).

Violence in this context is legitimate, so long as it is decisively retributive. In *Punisher/Black Widow: Spinning Doomsday's Web*, the Black Widow and the Punisher join forces, and she spends a large panel explaining how the cop-killing villain plans to make his getaway. The Punisher tersely responds, 'That's fascinating ... But I just want to rack up a *body count!*' (Chichester and Stroman 1992: 31). While his missions are sometimes improvised, for the right target he'll spend months or even years gathering intelligence. In 'Accounts Settled... Accounts Due!' (Goodwin and DeZuniga 1976), the Punisher leaves a trail of bodies as he tracks down the Syndicate's most lethal assassin. He finally recounts the complete story to Audrey, a seductive escort he's hired for the evening. She listens sympathetically as Castle describes his all-out war against the Syndicate and the mounting pile of corpses he's accumulated along the way. As his tale ends he wistfully reflects on the fact that 'every time I go after *any* kind of criminal scum, I *always* wonder "is this the time I feel my family's *avenged?*" And every time... it never seems *enough!*'. Audrey replies mournfully, 'I had you tell me all this to get it off your *chest*, love!...But you sound grimmer than *ever!*'. Audrey offers Castle a 'special' massage but instead pulls a knife from behind her back. She moves to stab him but he quickly draws his gun and blasts her in the chest. As the scene closes, the Punisher offers a sadistic eulogy: 'The Syndicate's lost an effective *assassin*, lady...but you know *what*, Audrey? It *still* isn't enough' (Goodwin et al 1976: 55).

For the Punisher, the pursuit of retribution threatens to morph into the pursuit of the apocalypse. Serial killing on the scale that the Punisher has achieved, and promises to attain in the future, is itself apocalyptic. The effort to cleanse the world of crime, which is the Punisher's *raison d'être*, is doomed from the outset. Since crime is ubiquitous, implementing this Sisyphean project requires an almost inconceivable level of bloodshed. After all, at one point or another nearly everyone breaks the law. The Punisher may not actively target marijuana smokers, jay walkers, or tax cheats, but he has blown up crack houses, wasted thousands of low-level mercenaries and armed

guards, and fired indiscriminately into crowded areas. While he prefers to work in silence, his actions often generate mayhem; this is not always an accidental byproduct of his efforts but is sometimes a deliberate tactic used to terrorize his enemies, who can be found pretty much everywhere. Metaphorically speaking, he is a horseman of the apocalypse, even if in his stories he somehow (presumably for commercial reasons) manages to never injure innocents, a concept that the character would be disinclined to trust in the first place.

Clearly there is a spirit of millenarianism at work in this narrative configuration, one that is deeply rooted in Old Testament values. Consider the prophet Isaiah's account of the fall of Babylon (13.9): 'Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wraith and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it ... Every one that is found shall be thrust through; and every one that is joined *unto* them shall fall by the sword' (qtd Quinby 1994: xvii). If 'the Punisher' is substituted for 'the Lord', this passage could be read as the character's mission statement. The specter of Catholic guilt clings to the character; his guilt manifests in the way he blames himself for the deaths of his wife and children. The Punisher sublimates these feelings by inflicting pain on others. According to Marvel continuity, Frank Castle left the seminary as a young adult because he had doubts about the Church's policy of forgiveness. In a flashback in *Intruder*, the Punisher recalled his days as a priest in training, revealing his dissatisfaction with the ethos of the Church: 'When I came here I felt like my chest was going to pop a tree, but now I don't know what I'm doing here. There is so much hatred in the world, so much suffering. How could God allow this to *happen*?' (Baron and Reinhold 1989: 34). Conditioned by his upbringing to believe in right and wrong – as well as eternal damnation – Castle nevertheless rejects the idea of waiting for judgment day, or deferring to the law. He prefers instead to deal in the here-and-how, outside the framework of legal statutes, Christian precepts, or conventional morality.

In a couple of stories that are outside of official continuity, the Punisher witnesses (or, more accurately, brings about) the apocalypse.



The most vivid example is provided in *The Punisher: The End*, a one-shot title published in 2004 under Marvel's MAX imprint, which is aimed at older readers. Written by Garth Ennis and drawn by Richard Corben, *The End* is set in the near future, after World War III has culminated in a full-scale global nuclear exchange. As a result of the nuclear fallout, the human race is dying. Castle survived the nuclear blasts by holing up in Sing-Sing prison's fallout shelter. After several months he leaves the shelter and heads to New York City, in hopes of locating the ultra-elite conspirators who engineered the conflagration in order to make obscene amounts of money. He eventually finds the conspirators hiding out in a bunker below lower Manhattan. Calling themselves 'the Coven,' they are made up of the wealthy elite: oil barons, four-star generals, computer billionaires, among others. Their spokesman explains that they are the only people left alive on the entire planet – and that they have a responsibility to repopulate the world. The Punisher murders them all, knowing full well that he has doomed the species. As the story closes, he walks out onto an irradiated wasteland, with only a few minutes to live before the radiation ravages his body. Story endings are rarely this final.

In *Punisher Kills the Marvel Universe*, Frank Castle kills off the entire superhero population, rather than the entire human race, but the violence is nevertheless extravagant. In this slim 'Marvel Alterniverse' one-shot by Garth Ennis and Dougie Braithwaite, Castle is a New York City police officer whose wife and kids become collateral damage during a confrontation between an 'alien strike force', the Avengers, and the X-Men. Cy'clops apologises, explaining 'We didn't know they were there.' 'You're sorry?' Castle replies, before whipping out his pistol and blowing away Cyclops, Jubilee, and several other costumed heroes (Ennis and Braithwaite 1995: 6). With assistance from a group of victims of prior superhero battles, he targets both superheroes and supervillains, from Spider-Man and Wolverine to Kingpin and Doctor Doom. Part of the story's appeal is the ingenuity that the Punisher brings to the mission. Rather than fighting the Hulk, for example, he places a homing device on the green monster and waits for him to transform back into Bruce Banner before gunning him down. Similarly,

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he tricks Captain America by stashing a weapon in the abandoned building where their final punch-up takes place. The Punisher asks 'Who are you to judge?', before shooting one of the country's greatest heroes in the back of the head (Ennis and Braithwaite 1995: 39). His final victim is Daredevil, who is also his childhood friend Matt Murdock. 'There's always someone under the mask', Murdock croaks, 'but you killed us all'. Castle replies, 'No Matt, there's one more to go', as he places his own side arm under his chin (Ennis and Braithwaite 1995: 48). In the Marvel universe, the path of destruction sometimes ends in self-destruction.

As the shock ending of *Punisher Kills the Marvel Universe* suggests, there is a cautionary quality attached to many Punisher stories. Rather than saying, 'this is what you should think', the stories more often warn that 'this is what could happen if someone thought and acted this way'. At the same time, there is an almost pornographic aspect to many Punisher stories. The graphic depictions of the Punisher's violent acts are almost saying 'this is what a human body would look like if you did *x* to it'. The cautionary imperative and the pornographic impulse work hand-in-hand, of course: the precaution would not be so effective if the imagery wasn't so outré. If his outlook is rejectionist, retributionist, and implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) apocalyptic, it is also filled with deep emotions of dread, guilt, and grief. The anger that drives the character is rooted in moral values and moralistic outrage. He is hyper-tense, hyper-angry, guilt-wracked killing machine who kills because he cares. In fact, he cares too much, and takes things to excess, which is why his stories are usually cautionary rather than celebratory.

While the Punisher's writers have explored the nature of heroism, the ethics of retribution, and the pathology of mass murder, there is ultimately something quite cynical about the Punisher franchise. The character began as a homage to Don Pendelton's Executioner series, and gained momentum from the backlash politics of the 1970s, the 1984 subway shootings of Bernie Goetz, and the militia movement of the 1990s. More than any other superhero, the Punisher has benefited from the so-called "right turn" of recent decades. As we have seen, the

character normally shuns politics, but occasionally condemns both elected officials and the criminal justice system itself. His politics are usually expressed through action, not words, and the main challenge that his cultural custodians at Marvel wrestle with is figuring out when too far goes *too far*. What kinds of tortures can't be depicted in a mass-market comic book? What sort of fictional treatment of violent behavior is unacceptable, to readers, distributors, retailers, reporters, and/or prosecutors and judges? Alternatively, how much timidity will turn off core readers? Every storyline and page that appears in print, or online, has to be considered from the perspective of the company's public image, stock price, sales figures, and legal position. The reason this difficult work gets done is because the vengeance genre is lucrative. The Punisher may be cynical and hard-bitten, but the corporate entity that controls the rights to the character (somewhat ironically, the Walt Disney Corporation) necessarily embraces an even deeper cynicism – the kind of mercenary calculation that keeps the franchise alive after nearly four implausible decades of solo warfare in a densely crowded metropolis.

The decadent corporate logic that is embedded in the character is probably best expressed in one of the most unusual titles ever published by Marvel Comics – *The Punisher Armory*. Ten issues of this title were released between July 1990 and November 1994. Unlike conventional superhero titles, these comics lack anything resembling plot, dialogue, suspense, or conflict. Instead, each issue consists of detailed sketches of the Punisher's weapons and equipment – page after page of handguns, machine guns, shotguns, sniper rifles, silencers, mines, grenades, rocket launchers, knives, crossbows, bolt cutters, entry shields, listening devices, climbing gear, camping equipment, battlefield outfits, anti-tank weapons, armored cars, armored buses, armored trucks, and hovercraft. In other words, everything a motivated individual needs to extinguish the lives of large numbers of people. Accompanying these images are Castle's descriptions of the function of each object. Some of this commentary has a ruminative quality. In an editorial in the first issue, the title's writer, Eliot Brown, explained his goal 'has been to delve into the needs of such a man, to shape his world, to think as

a hunter of men does, to anticipate the high and often very low-tech dangers and obstacles that face him' (1990: 33). It is difficult to think of another comic book figure, in any universe, that could inspire such a relentless, militaristic, and fetishistic series. Astonishingly, the series came with the stamp of approval from the Comics Code Authority, which told distributors it could be sold on newsstands and in drug stores as well as specialty shops. 'Thirty-two explosive pages of bone-blasting weaponry!' exclaims the promotional text on the covers. If the *Armory* series is ever collected in a single volume, the Disney Corporation and its shareholders will cynically reap the rewards.

### Political Boundaries

From Superman and Batman, to Doctor Who and James Bond, many popular entertainment franchises with strong heroes and loyal followings predate the Punisher. However, these iconic characters have substantially evolved over time, whether measured in terms of costume, methods, mannerisms, or sensibility. In contrast, the Punisher has pretty much stayed the same. His look, personality, and even speech patterns have changed only slightly since the mid-1970s. While various writers, artists, and editors have tweaked the character, placed him in exotic settings, and added biographical details, the degree of fundamental continuity over a period of several decades is striking. The cultural zeitgeist does not seem to faze him; technology moves forward, but his rationale, his actions, and even his facial expressions remain the same. From the standpoint of the Marvel universe, Frank Castle is 'old school' – a throwback to an earlier era, an anachronism in a high-tech world. In some versions he's aged in real time, from the Vietnam War to today, which means he's actively fighting crime in his sixties. In these stories he's an urban legend, with police officers and villains expressing surprise when they find out he's still around.

An important reason why the Punisher is so unbending is because he argues with the culture rather than responds or conforms to it. Far from being an empty vessel for whatever narrative devices happen to be selling at any particular juncture, the Punisher offers a coherent

philosophy of retributive justice that speaks to some fans and leaves others cold. Since he privileges natural law over legal niceties, it makes sense that he refuses to trim his sails. His inflexible persona is a byproduct of his obdurate worldview. For the most part, his franchise gatekeepers have wisely decided to stick with this proven formula, rather than trying to spice things up. A few storylines are exceptions to this rule, such as the 2009-2010 *Frankencastle* misfire, the kitschy 1994 Punisher-Archie team-up, and a best-forgotten three-part story from 1992, in which the Punisher is transformed into a black man by a drug-addled plastic surgeon. Most of the time, however, the character closely resembles the 'grim wrecker' depicted in his earliest stories. The character's response to pretty much any scenario is self-evident.

Thus, the Punisher is an inherently didactic character, which is one reason why he doesn't expend a lot of energy trying to explain or justify his actions. He may be psychologically disturbed but he is definitely not neurotic, unlike so many other costumed adventurers in the Marvel universe. The Punisher is a hugely profitable entertainment franchise that has inspired movies, video games, and a slew of licensed products. But the character is also a taut visual code that sums up an entire worldview. What the character says is that anger matters: that political and legal thinkers ignore or discount rage at their peril.

For the Punisher, the legal system is little more than an inconvenience. Any lingering sense of fealty to the law as an abstraction that he may have once felt has been trumped by his unshakable sense of morality and justice, which he measures with reference to the anger he's feeling at any given moment. Following the murder of his family, the only law the Punisher retains any interest in or commitment to is natural law, as he defines it. He seems to think that the very idea of natural justice – particularly the claim that everyone has a right to defend him or herself from harm – somehow legitimates his actions. Rather than approaching these questions from a nihilistic standpoint, in which the only relevant consideration is how something makes you feel, he presents himself as a biblically informed apostle of retributive justice. But the idea that an enraged individual could do a better job of

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discerning and embodying true justice than complex social institutions is somewhat implausible. The Punisher story that readers should ask for is one in which the character is held accountable for his crimes.

## Note

- 1 Throughout this essay, all emphases within quotation marks are in the original.

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