

**POSTMODERNITY IN FRAMES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OVER  
BATMAN AND RANXEROX**

Renato Muchiuti Aranha

*Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina*

**RESUMO:** O presente trabalho busca comparar dois quadrinhos diferentes produzidos entre o final dos anos 1970 e 1980, discutindo sobre o modo como eles representam a decadência da Modernidade e a ascensão da Pós-modernidade (BAUMAN, 2001; KOSELLECK, 2006): a *graphic novel* produzida nos Estados Unidos por Frank Miller, *Batman: o Cavaleiro das Trevas* (2002) e a revista em quadrinhos italiana, posteriormente convertida em *graphic novel*, Ranxerox, criada por Stefano Tamburini e Tanino Liberatore (2002). Elas são produções diferentes em termos de tipo de quadrinho, linguagem e país, porém convergem como exemplos representativos da mudança de período histórico na sociedade Ocidental. Para realizar o trabalho de comparação entre os dois quadrinhos, utilizo a referência de modernidade líquida de Zygmunt Bauman e as implicações desse novo período histórico, juntamente com o conceito de aceleração do tempo proposto por Reinhart Koselleck para descrever as mudanças percebidas pelas pessoas comuns no momento estudado. Para a discussão de quadrinhos como uma mídia própria faço uso das proposições teóricas de Scott McCloud, buscando ao mesmo tempo seguir sua idéia de utilizar uma linguagem mais leve, como se tivesse falando diretamente para o leitor em uma conversa casual, ainda que alinhado a um conteúdo e a discussões acadêmicas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Quadrinhos; Pós-modernidade; Bauman; Modernidade

**ABSTRACT:** This study aims to compare two different comics produced in the late 1970's and in the 1980's, focusing on how they represent the decay of Modernity and the emergence of Postmodernity (Bauman, 2001; Koselleck, 2006): the U.S. graphic novel created by Frank Miller, *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns* (2002); and the Italian comic book, later converted in graphic novels, Ranxerox, created by Stefano Tamburini and Tanino Liberatore (2002). They are different productions in terms of style, language and country, but they converge as representative examples of a changing period in the Western society. In order to compare both works, I rely on Zygmunt Bauman's reference of "liquid modernity", and his theories on the implications of this new historical period, along with Reinhart Koselleck's concept of acceleration of time to describe how people from the period hereby analyzed have perceived the changes in the society they were inserted in. To deal with comics as a particular media, it will be used Scott McCloud's theories, and at the same time, I will also try to follow his idea of

discussing theory with a lighter language, as if speaking directly to the readers in a casual conversation, although spiced with scholastic content and discussions.

**KEYWORDS:** Comics; Postmodernity; Bauman; Modernity

The present study is a theoretical discussion about time relations made upon a comparative analysis of two comic books produced in a moment of paradigm shifting from Modernity to Postmodernity. Those two comics are examples of how the new time perspectives were apprehended and historically recorded in the exact same time they were happening. As the present study is inserted in a “liquid modernity”<sup>1</sup> framework, I found myself between two authors and, consequently, two different theoretical frames: Marshall Berman, a modernist, and Zygmunt Bauman, a postmodernist.

Both Berman and Bauman draw their theories from Marx and Engels’s ideas presented in the *Communist Manifesto*, mainly the principle that Modernity was melting solid social and cultural structures and transforming what once was considered fixed in liquid configurations. Berman presents such discussion in the following quotation: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away; all new-formed ones became antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts in the air” (qtd. in BERMAN, 1988, p. 21).

Berman’s most distinguished book is *All that is solid melts in the air*, a title originated from an excerpt of Marx and Engels’s work, from where the quotation presented above was taken. The book was published in 1984 and shows that we are still living in the Modern time and under Modern rules and norms. For him, Modernity has

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<sup>1</sup> A new time in which the late Modernity does not exist anymore, and where things and beings are not solid, but constantly moving, changing, impossible to grab and to get attached to.

always been liquid, in a constant process of melting old solids just to build new ones in their place, which would also melt someday, invariably.

Although Bauman's starting point is the same referential and quotation of Berman's – as the term “liquid Modernity” suggests – he is not inclined to believe that Modernity is creating new solid structures as Marx and Berman believed. According to Bauman, everything is liquid, ephemeral, and transitory. For the Polish sociologist, only a few reminiscences of the old solid structures are present nowadays, and that is not something to be proud of, because only people who are not comfortable in that transitory globalized world tend to keep themselves attached to something, whether they are things, other people or places.

In the Argentinian movie *El secreto de sus ojos* (The secret in their eyes) - even though the storyline happens in the 1970s, it was produced and released in 2009 - there is a dialog between the characters Benjamin and Sandoval, in which the later says, “a person can change in every aspect of his life: his face, his house, his family, his wife, his religion, his god... but there is one thing that no one can change, Benjamin... he cannot change his passion” (Campanella 2009)<sup>2</sup>. The idea brought by this quote is the reality of the present liquid Modernity, following Bauman's line of reasoning, in which all aspects of our daily life are in a constant recreation, and we only hold on to some specific ones, like an old friend or a partner, or none. It is also interesting to introduce the notion that it was in the 1970s, according to Reinhart Koselleck, that people began to notice the new configuration of time and that Modernity has reached a breaking point.

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<sup>2</sup> From the original: “*El tipo puede cambiar de todo: de cara, de casa de familia, de novia, de religión, de dios... pero hay una cosa que no puede cambiar Benjamin... no puede cambiar de pasión.*” All translations were made by Renato Muchiuti Aranha

Koselleck is one among other scholars from the humanities that, in the 1970s, began to think about the development of a new perception of time and ways of perceiving and signifying it. He was also concerned about how to act in this new perspective of time and its present relations with Past and Future Times. Situated in that discussion, the idea of “regime of historicity”, used and developed by François Hartog and Reinhart Koselleck, was formulated to embrace those changes in our perception of time.

In the 1980s, the postmodern perspective grew stronger and, along with it, a new regime of historicity definitely could be seen in the political practices of governments and scholars. A replacement of the Modern regime of historicity was taking place and transferring the “horizon of expectation” (KOSELLECK, 2006) to the present itself. Hartog calls this process “presentism”, a creation of a present that is “massive, invasive, pervasive, that has no other horizon than itself, daily manufacturing's past and future that he needs” (HARTOG, 2006, p. 10). This means that the present is now the focus of society, due to the new significations of past and future, now closer in time to the present because of the acceleration of time, changing things so fast that the present encompasses both of them. In a time in which past and future are created, the future is only a representation of present predictions and past experiences depend upon their creation on present events. The previous (modern) idea of future covered by the figure of progress, created by Kant in the late 18th Century, based on the idea that the future would be better because it ought to (KOSELLECK, 2006, p. 318) has been broken. The new regime focuses on the present. Thus, the crises in Modernity produced, as reaction, the introduction of a new regime of historicity.

I am comfortable to say that Bauman's formulations over the existence of a postmodern condition in Western society (and due to globalization, almost in the entire

globe) are closely connected to the ideas of those authors dealing with the philosophy of history and its movements. In short, both conceptualizations address not only a natural change in Modernity, as Berman believed, but an entirely new reality, with a new relationship with time, in which the future is depicted as an apocalyptic experience, including the worst prognostics. Another consequence of this situation is, also, the dissolution of Modern entities (or reminiscences of premodern society) that became (and are becoming) liquid, unstable, temporary and with no solid basis for us to hang on.

Even though the main references are based on the field of humanities, the present research is a critical reading of comics as a result of its media and methodology. In this sense, one relevant theoretical background comes from Hayden White's works. Besides White's background in history, he also deals with literary critique; for him, history is closer to literature than to a science in humanities. In this work, I follow White's theory due to the fact that I do want to perceive and to dialogue with a historical perception of time, and how events and moments appear in comics, discussing how they are represented. White's guidance includes the notion that literature and history are part of dialoguing areas, and the present study transits between literature and history and uses theoretical support from sociology, philosophy and social sciences, just like his theory.

When explaining the relationship between history and literature, Hayden White uses a common concept to achieve goals in both areas, which is the use of a narrative structure. The idea of narrative as central in the act of telling a story is not new, as Walter Benjamin dealt with it in his book "The Storyteller" (in the original *Der Erzähler*, which was also translated as the Narrator). Benjamin discussed the role of the narrator and types of narratives, connecting concepts as "memory" and "experience." Following the objectives of this study, I will not use those terms, so it is not reasonable

to use Benjamin's theory, but, rather, White's perspective. For the U.S. researcher, the role of the narrator is more than a storyteller, but someone who (co)produces the storyline, as the narrator selects what to tell about a fact, how to present the subjects and the context of it (WHITE, 1992, p. 84). The narrator is someone who chooses the passages he/she would add, the ones that would be left out, the details that would be changed and so on. Therefore, the narrator is not only the person who tells the story, but the one who defines what story is going to be told, which means that two characters would probably tell the same fact in different ways, for each of them have their own focus and interests.

White recognizes that history has a close relation with literature, that there is not a single way to represent the same fact. More than that, this is a two-way path: if history is closer to literature, literature has its resemblances with history as well. Every literary work is included in a specific time and space, and it is also a historical record for its content. So, it is possible to say that the role of the narrator is not only to tell a story, but, first, to create it and give its tone. In order for a story to be a good one, it should be based on something plausible, based on some kind of facts. There is also the possibility of not constructing the narrative within a plausible storyline, but, even so, the story and its creator belong to a certain time, and it is not possible to be ahead of time; all of us can only think and surmise under a specific context. This specific context, it is necessary to say, is the present; predictions of a far future always represent an improved present. Like the popular notion about cinema, that a movie representing the future tells more about its own present than about future. Marx also states that "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under already existing circumstances, given and transmitted

from the past” (MARX, 2007, p. 19)<sup>3</sup>. To a certain extent, it is possible to say that this is the formula for both literature and history productions.

## 1. Comics

Before presenting the debate around comic’s theory and its implications, it is time to introduce the main characters that are going to be analyzed. Batman was created in 1939 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger (whose participation was just recognized by Kane in 1989, 15 years after Finger’s death). His first appearance took place in *Detective Comics* #27 (later DC Comics). His alter ego is Bruce Wayne, the richest person in Gotham City, who is still suffering after his childhood trauma: he watched his parents being murdered by a burglar. As a consequence of his trauma, he dedicates his entire life to fight against crime, in Gotham. In order to become Batman, he develops a range of skills, like martial arts, for instance, and several new weapons, as Batman does not use fire guns due to their parents’ tragedy by an armed robber. That is the story of how Batman has emerged. He chooses the figure of a bat because he had an “encounter with a bat while he was seeking a disguise able to strike terror into the heart of criminals” (Coogan, 2009, p. 79).

Ranxerox, on the other hand, is an android created in the Sapienza Università di Roma, or simply La Sapienza, in 1986. He was built from an old Xerox machine –that is the origin of his name. The first Ranxerox story came out in 1978. In this sense, 1986 was a near future for Tamburini and Liberatore, the same way that they could also play with the reference with 1968. Although Ranxerox changes his living place during time (he began living in Rome, but he lived for a certain period of time in New York), the

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from: “*Os homens fazem sua própria história, mas não a fazem como querem; não a fazem sobre circunstâncias de sua escolha e sim sobre aquelas com que se defrontam diretamente, legadas e transmitidas pelo passado.*”

setting is always a big city. Both characters' cities, Gotham and Rome or New York, are places in which violence is simply part of the daily life, representing the authors' perceptions of the world.

After presenting the main characters, it is time to ask some questions, and the first one should be what is this literary genre that people can simply call comics? As simple as that question might appear to be, the answer is a little more complicated. To begin with, Will Eisner, a reference in the area, proposes the idea of using the term “sequential art” to define all range of comics format, which comprehends comic strips, comic books, graphic novels and all sorts of expressions that put together frames, images and texts in a sequential order. For him, a Garfield comic strip in the Sunday newspaper is not the same as a Batman comic book or a Watchmen graphic novel, but all of them may be included in the same general concept.

Eisner was the first to present a theoretical work about comics describing the elements of the genre and its specific characteristics. For him, one element that differentiates comics from other types of literature is the way one reads it. Eisner points out that one should learn how to read a map, a book, musical scores, and the same should happen in relation to comics, as it “presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretative skills” (EISNER, 1995, p. 8)<sup>4</sup>. More than just an overlapping of images and words that need to be decoded, the structure of comics has its own way to be read that also needs to be deciphered. For example, modern Western comics are read from left to right, from top to bottom, line by line while modern Eastern comics are also read from top to bottom, but from right to left. Thus, readers should learn how to wander around the pages of

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<sup>4</sup> Translated from: *“Sobreposição de palavras e imagem, e, assim, é preciso que o leitor exerça as suas habilidades interpretativas visuais e verbais.”*



comics, how to perceive specific elements of the genre, like the size of the frames, the border of the frames, the use of the title, onomatopoeia and many other elements typical of the comics genre.

Another comics researcher that is useful for the present study is Scott McCloud, whose theoretical books are written in the comics format. This is to say that McCloud develops his theory for those initiated in comics reading, escaping the established model which states that theory should follow the traditional pattern of putting the words in lines for dozens of pages in a row. He is also a follower of Eisner's theories, and develops his master's idea about "sequential art." In other words, McCloud develops his theories based on Eisner's term. He explains, in an imaginary conversation with the audience, that sequential art is an umbrella term, and, for this reason, it is too general. Then, he suggests another term: "visual sequential art". However, he is not happy with it either, after all, this is still a generalization- a cartoon, for instance, is also a visual sequential art, but has nothing to do with comics. He then proposes "visual sequential art juxtaposed." In this case, he could create a category in which a cartoon, as well as a movie, arts that are allowed to be seen only one frame at a time, cannot be included, establishing a theoretical definition that can be applied only for comics, since comics allow the reader to see more than a frame at the same time. After that, he claims that "juxtaposed images and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce and aesthetic response in the viewer" (MCCLOUD, 2005, p. 9)<sup>5</sup>.

After presenting the main characters and the theoretical background of this research, it is time to begin the discussion about how comic books, and specifically the

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<sup>5</sup> Translated from: *"Imagens pictóricas e outras justapostas em seqüência deliberada destinadas a transmitir informações e/ou produzir uma resposta no expectador."*

two selected to be hereby analyzed, are linked to a postmodern context. For now on, I intent to explore their characteristics and themes through the light of a postmodern perspective.

## 2. Postmodernity in 1980s comics

What is a postmodern comic book and how do Batman and Ranxerox fit in this category of analysis? According to Nildo Viana (2011), the Green Archer and the Green Lantern, two famous DC Comics heroes, were the forerunners of a changing at DC Comics in the late 1970s, focusing in more complex and politicized stories and characters. Following those changes, Batman's stories began to be set at night. It is interesting to notice that the Green Arrow, Oliver Queen's alter ego, is a mixture of Bruce Wayne and Robin Hood – he is rich and dresses himself like the English thief, all in green, carrying bow and arrows. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Oliver is seen helping Batman in the final confrontation against government forces and Superman.

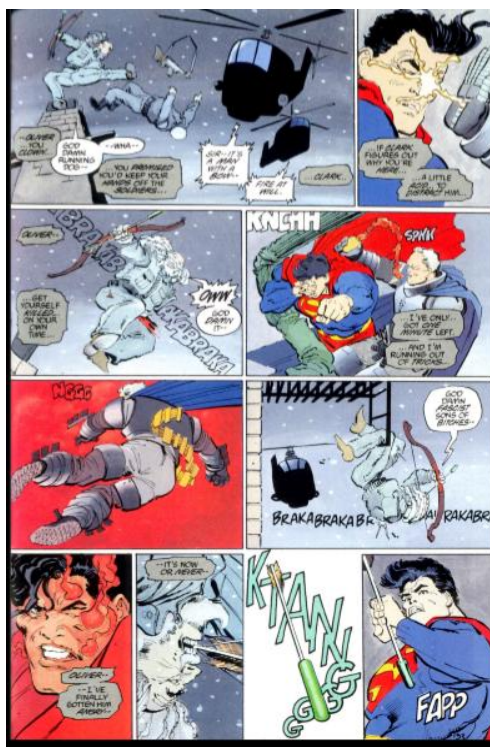


Fig.1 Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 2002, page 192.

Miller does this as a tribute to the precursors of a new sequential art style, trying to bring the public interest back to comics after the decay of the media in the previous decade. According to some theorists, the development and popularization of the radio and, mainly, the television were responsible for the decreasing of the comics' public. At the same time, Miller also reinforces the view that a white rich elite is protecting people from evil mobs, being the latter represented by gangs and inefficient elected government.

In the late 1970s, comics begin to question social, political and cultural values of the Western society, represented, in the comics, by the U.S. society, as well as its moral parameters. These changes in the content of the format start to make comic books a more politicized media (in some cases with a far-right political approach) and, at the same time, construct a sense of mistrusting in all modern institutions.

The point of view present in this article is only possible when taking into consideration that the comics selected for this analysis were not involved in any censorship policy and, specifically in Batman's case, it was published after the Comics Code was taken down. Summarizing, the Comics Code Authority was imposed in 1954, and in Cary D. Adkinson words:

The Code's first six "General Standards" for "Editorial Matter" defended the legitimacy of the criminal justice system by explicitly condemning content that in any way, shape, or form could be interpreted as inspiring criminal behavior and/or disrespect of legal-based authority. According to these guidelines,

- 1) Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals;

2) No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime;

3) Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority;

4) If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity;

5) Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates the desire for emulation; and

6) In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds. (ADKINSON, 2008, p. 246)

The Comics Code was inspired by the Motion Picture Association of America's Production Code, released in 1930, but the latter was never a real force upon the movie industry and in the 1950s got into decline. The crisis in the U.S. cinema, which was facing competition with European movies, was one of the reasons to drop the censorship code for good, at least in cinema. Besides the Motion Picture Production Code inspiration, another major factor came out and helped in the imposition of the Comics Code: Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). Wertham made a crusade against comics in the U.S.. For him, comics were responsible for generating violent behavior in children, for increasing illiteracy, and for transforming children into criminals. So, Wertham convinced the U.S. senate of the importance in establishing laws that would allow the representations of law enforcement power only as good, loyal and perfect.

For the purpose of this article, I will divide the analysis in three main topics: (1) the political environment and law enforcement, for it is one of the main topics in

Batman, but it is a marginal and practically nonexistent one in *Ranxerox*; (2) the question of fear and its importance in Postmodernism; and (3) the desacralization of institutions, positions and values.

### **2.1 Policies and politicians.**

In *The Dark Knight Returns*, there are many representations of political powers and restraining powers from police enforcement and military force, but in *Ranxerox* these authorities do not appear in the narrative. As Postmodernity recognizes a decay in modern institutions, the modern government pattern and its repressive model have since then been questioned. So the invisibility of State forces in the narrative is justified not as a fault, but as a purposeful omission. When discussing about memory, Michael Pollak, an Austrian sociologist aligned to Present Time studies, comes to terms with the importance of “silence.” For him, silence is related to memory as much as forgetfulness. These are artifices used to create a coherent life narrative. In *Ranxerox*, the silence is not an error or omitted only to simplify the narrative, but a way to show the author’s memories and perceptions from the represented period. By silencing some aspects, the narrative tells us that those aspects do not exist in that society or that they are irrelevant.

For Hayden White:

The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the employment of a novel or a play. For example, no historical event is intrinsically tragic; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view or from within the

context of a structured set of events of which it is an element enjoying a privileged place. (WHITE, 1992, p. 84)

Although White is talking about historical narratives, comics are a form of historical records, and, so, they talk more about their time of production than about the imaginary future they try to create. White's perspective is useful due to the idea that no story or history has its own core, but that the events are selected and ordered in a meaningful narrative with a specific tone. For instance, two newspapers produced in the same day can have some news that appear only in one of them, some that are presented in a similar tone and also some that are so opposite to each other by their semantic and meaning construction that, besides the same topic, they do not look alike at all. The reason *Ranxerox* and *Batman* are so different in some aspects and similar in others is related to their authors' choices and beliefs, even though they are representing the same period of time.

In *Batman*, there are a great amount of examples of political and restraining powers, represented by the police and military force. The police are useless, but Commissioner Gordon, while the military force is as useless as the police force, except for Superman. The politicians, on the other hand, are represented as useless and/or corrupt. Looking at the panel below, representing Gotham's police force, there is a couple of police officers chasing some criminals, when Batman appears. The older policeman who knew Batman from his past vigilantism actions does not take part in the action and advice the rookie to do the same.



Fig. 2 Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 2002, page 36.

Even if Batman himself is an outlaw due to his activities as a vigilante, he is a hero for Gotham's police force as he has an important role fighting crime. In the previous scene and in its development, the seasoned cop trusts in the masked hero to debunk the criminals, while the rookie believes that he should act and arrest Batman.

Miller is telling us that the new generation has a tendency to fulfill the law in order to combat vigilantes, but become useless to fight the “real crime”. In the second part of the graphic novel, Commissioner Gordon is retired due to his age and the new police commissioner is a woman whose first action is to arrest Batman for the crime of being a masked man combating crime. Miller represents the inefficacy of police and the necessity of the vigilante, who is better than the State and is not valued by his actions.

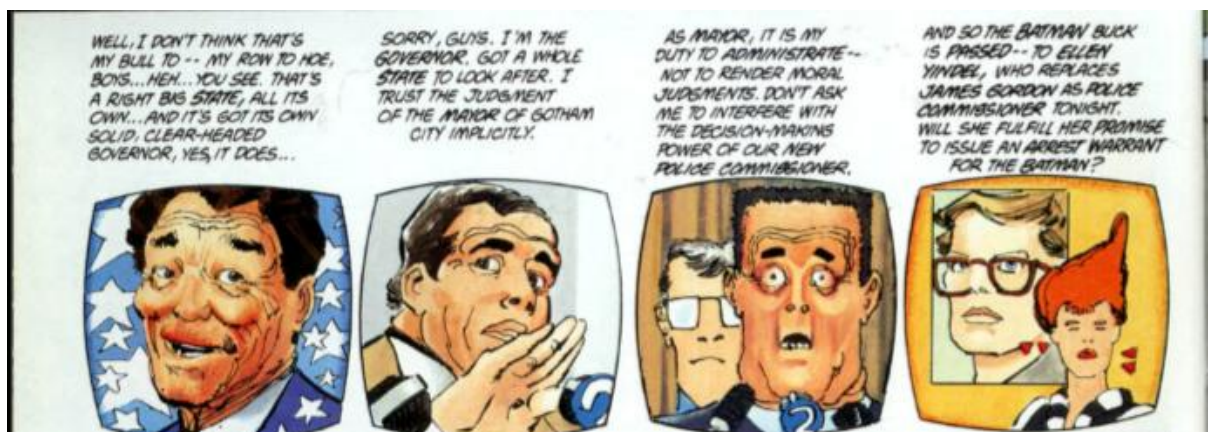


Fig.3 Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 2002, page 108.

When representing politicians, they are all depicted as weak and liars. The most representative politician is the figure of the U.S. President at that time, Ronald Reagan (1981-89). His character is drawn in more detail in the story, being the one represented at the left in the previous image. We can relate this form of drawing to a phenomena described by Scott McCloud (2005): the more detailed a drawing is, more it represents someone, whereas the simplest the drawing is, more is the tendency for us, readers, to recognize ourselves in that character. It is possible to argue that Miller wants us to see that the president is really Reagan. Be honest, with whom are you more inclined to identify yourself from those four characters above? According to McCloud, it is more likely that your answer would be with police commissioner Ellen Yindel, because it is a simpler drawing, with less shadow and lines, less detailed, a plain drawn character.



Reagan was a Republican conservative and neoliberal, in favor of a deregulated economy and a minimum state. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, he is seen as a manipulative and masked character, as well as weak. In the story, he allows the Soviets to launch a nuclear missile towards the United States. He appears talking to the U.S. people, to the news and to Superman. When talking to the news, as depicted in figure 6, he does not look afraid like his counterparts, the governor and the mayor. He is steady, calm and not answering the questions. Later the reader gets to know he asks Superman to “take care” of Batman. In the news, he is talking about the war against the USSR in Corto Maltes Island (a tribute to *Corto Maltese* comic and a reference to Cuba<sup>6</sup>).

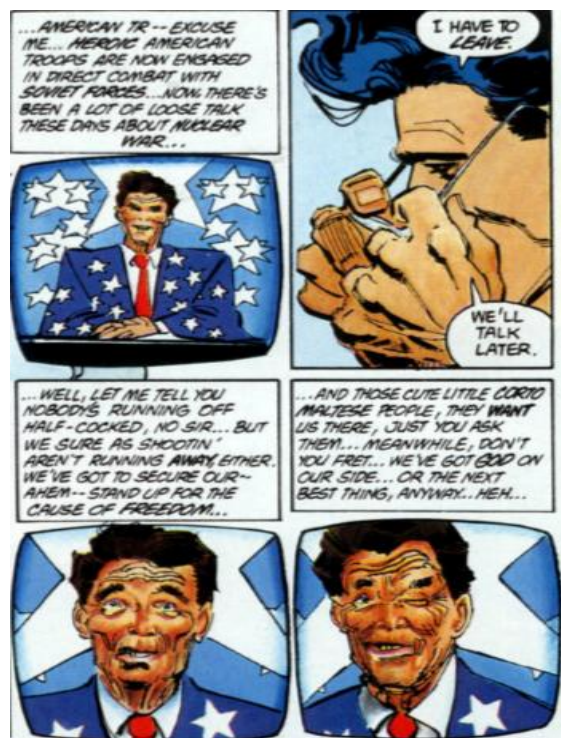


Fig.4 Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 2002, page 119.

It is noteworthy the wink Reagan gives to the audience in the last frame, indicating that Superman is on his side. Reagan was an actor before becoming a

<sup>6</sup> A reference to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when Soviet government have positioned nuclear missiles in the Caribbean island. There is also a reference in the presence of nuclear weapons in Miller's story.

politician and his attitudes in the narrative reflect his ability to act. That is why he is criticized, due to his tendency to make the State less and less present with an increasing privatization in all social and economic aspects, with no will to create a strong State (so important to Miller).

## **2.2 Postmodernity and fear**

Fear is another element in common in Batman and *Ranxerox*. Bauman presents the idea of fear, its creation, reverberation and expansion as one of the most markedly postmodern experiences, in which the discourses of hate, prejudice, state, and elite control are intrinsically part of postmodern practice of fear.

In *Ranxerox*, we do not have the presence of police force or any State representative organ, but we do have its counterpart: urban violence and crime. There is the presence of murder, rape, pedophilia, drug trafficking, racketeering and physical assault. However, one thing that called my attention is the fact that only a few people are shocked by those acts, while the great majority is spectators with no particular reaction against the attempts or is in fact enjoying them. Ranxerox is the person who presents more reaction to world's interpellations, always with an angry homicide answer.



Fig. 5 Tamburini, Stefano and Liberatore, Tanino. *Ranxerox*. Editori del Grifo: Montepulciano. Anno 1, Numero 1, 1992, page 18



Fig. 6 Tamburini, Stefano and Liberatore, Tanino. *Ranxerox*. Editori del Grifo: Montepulciano. Anno 1, Numero 1, 1992, page 24

As it is possible to see in some examples given here, the violence is caused by urban gangs, drug dealers and, most of all, *Ranxerox*. Although our main character is the greatest killer in all stories, he is not even once charged or threatened by the police. *Ranxerox*, despite dealing with pedophilia, drug trafficking, urban violence and a killing robot, does not present the question of counter violence by the State, nor the presence of fear in the characters who live in that world, but a condescending way of life, as it is all part of their lives in that moment and there is nothing to worry or to do about it.

Batman, at the time of his creation in 1939, was a perfect son of Modernity. According to Bauman “the modern variety of insecurity is marked by a fear mostly of human maleficence and of human malefactors”<sup>7</sup> (BAUMAN, 2007, p. 63). The core of the character is kept in Miller's version, but in a postmodern shape. In *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns*, we do have some of those questions brought up in *Ranxerox*, as the city of Gotham is full of gangs just like Rome and New York City. There is violence in the streets, as robbery, aggression and murderers (pedophilia and drugs do not appear in the US graphic novel). In a half-page frame, interspersing the image and speech of the Mutants' gang and Batman thoughts, Miller shows us that there is a menacing marginal power.

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<sup>7</sup> Translated from: “A variedade moderna de insegurança é caracterizada distintivamente pelo medo da maleficência e dos malfeitores humanos.”



Fig.7 Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 2002, page 73.

The main difference between Miller and Liberatore and Tamburini is that the Italian duo does not make use of fear. Although, in Ranxerox stories, there are plenty of situations to be afraid of, the characters seem not to notice the violent environment and fearsome circumstances in the narrative. For example, when the woman in the restroom is being raped, she is angry and is cursing; or when Lubna is kidnapped, she is angry sometimes and complacent in others; or even when it is taking place a race, emulating Ben Hur chariot scene, but with guns, people presents a livid or smiling expression. There is no fear in their universe and, at the same time, there is no controlling power but a chaos of gangs and social classes.

On the other hand, Miller is in favor of vigilantism: the outlaw use of force to combat crime. He is a supporter of Maquiavel maximum “the ends justify the means.” All expressions in *Batman's* narrative are angry by the results of a crime or with a shocked and/or fearful face, helped by the dark background. The police is present at the scenes, but even they cannot calm down the helpless frightened population of Gotham.

Batman, and specially Miller's version of the character, incorporates the figure of the man who is going to knock out the criminals, the poor, the bothersome, and all sort of people that do not represent the ideal society for those authoritarian right wings. Fear is a constant presence in the story, in the dark city crowded with terrors protected by a man who dresses as a bat, transforming his worst fear in his enemies fear as well.

In Batman's narrative, the amount of terrified faces is very significant. People are always afraid of Batman, the villains Joker and Two Faces, afraid of the gangs and criminals, as you can see in the collage of frames below.



Fig.8 Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 2002, collage of pages 27, 145, 147 and 175.

Terrified civilians and policemen are common in *The Dark Knight Returns*, and those frames above are just an illustration of this presence. Miller wants the reader to see things in a darker and pessimist tone. The same way that Reagan has Superman as his super-hero, as part of his State force, Miller trusts in Batman to make things right according to his standards. So, Miller creates a world in which Batman is the only hope, and he provides hope by using his own methods of doing what he considers right.

In *Ranxerox*, there is a different point of view, which can be noticed in the following images, by the reaction of characters and the notion of violence:



Fig. 9 Tamburini, Stefano and Liberatore, Tanino. *Ranxerox*. Editori del Grifo: Montepulciano. Anno 1, Numero 1, 1992, page 31.



Fig. 10 Tamburini, Stefano and Liberatore, Tanino. *Ranxerox*. Editori del Grifo: Montepulciano. Anno 1, Numero 2, 1992, page 18



In *Batman*, common people and a great amount of law enforcement are represented with their faces showing dread, while the heroes and villains present a raging or concentrated face most of the time. On the other hand, in *Ranxerox* all the characters, even the supporting and extra ones, have two expressions; they are smiling or they are angry. Even when they are being beaten up, their faces show anger, but never fear. That is due to a new reality on the postmodern society, a time in which everything is momentary and disposable (in big cities of Western capitalist countries at least). There is no need to fear, because everything will already be gone tomorrow and people are expected to live with their loss.

### 2.3 Desacralization

Another aspect of the postmodern period is the end of sacred modern institutions. In *Ranxerox*, it is possible to notice an interesting example. The story not only desacralizes modern institutions, but also concepts, like in that half-page frame showing an abandoned *Ranxerox* in front of the Colosseum, in Rome.

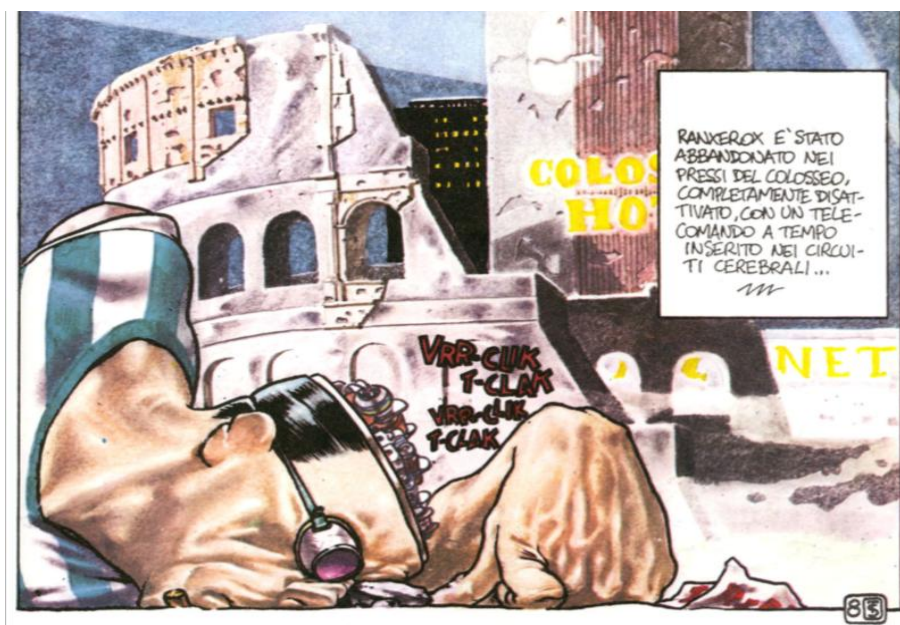


Fig.11 Tamburini, Stefano and Liberatore, Tanino. *Ranxerox*. Editori del Grifo: Montepulciano. Anno 1, Numero 1, 1992, page 8

Note that the Colosseum, one of the biggest archaeological reminiscence of Ancient Roman Empire, considered one of the most beautiful historical patrimonies in modern standards, has become a hotel, a building with a lot of rooms for tourists and foreigners.

The concept of progress is one that suffers the most from the idea of desacralization, for the conception of future is inherent of Modernity. In the 12<sup>th</sup> page of the graphic novel, Miller presents us a half page illustration of Bruce Wayne walking down the streets with his inner thoughts appearing at the right space of the page. We can see at least two men bare feet, with agonizing faces holding posters in which is written “we are damned.”

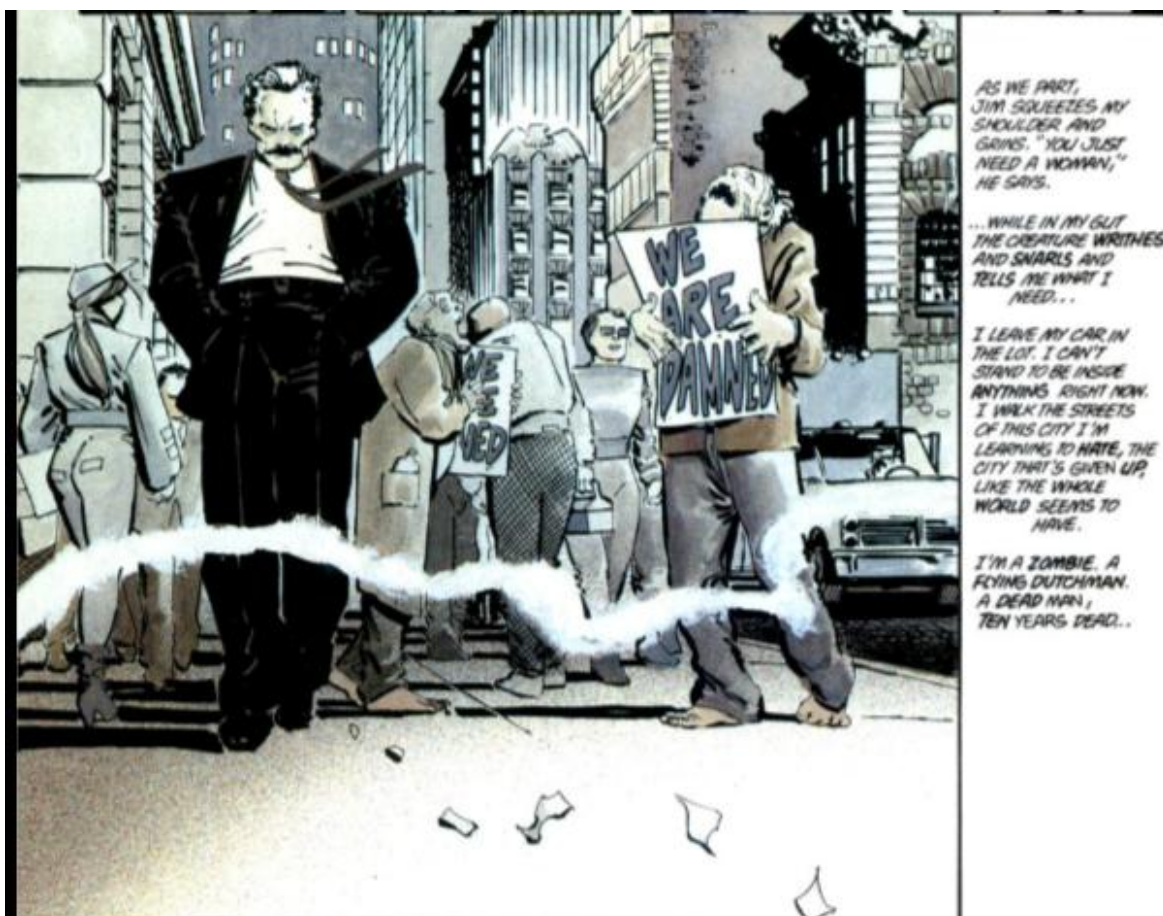


Fig.12 Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 2002, page 12.

Wayne says: “the city I'm learning to hate, the city that's given up, like the whole world seems to have” (MILLER, 2002, P. 12). In Wayne's thoughts, there is a delusion tone (mostly) about Western society, like it is not heading toward a bright future of the teleological Modernity experience, but toward nowhere except a chaotic idea of future with all the pessimistic forecasts. For instance, we can find literature describing the futuristic pessimistic prediction, as Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums*, published in 1993, discussing how the poverty and its growth are a world-wide problem. Another example is Bauman's books, that predict a future in which all countries in the world will need to become aware that they share the same planet and need to act together to protect it, otherwise there will be an increasing of poverty, conflict and fear.

Another element that is taken off from its pedestal in the two comic books analyzed is the media. During the Golden Age of comics<sup>8</sup>, the media was, more often than not, associated with the hero, allied with the good guys. Some examples are the reporter Clark Kent, the newsboy Billy Batson, and the radio announcer Alan Scott, respectively Superman, Captain Marvel (Shazam) and Green Lantern. Along with the media, comes the discourse of impartiality – a journalistic fallacy which creates the idea that the news shows only facts, with no particular interest.

In the *Dark Knight Returns*, the TV News is represented from a different perspective, as a cynical media, and the best example is the most famous journalist of comics history, Clark Kent/Superman. He represents the correct news worker, a model citizen: the hero who saves everyone, including fighting against the Nazis in World War II. In Miller's story, he is seen as the superhero who helps the U.S. government, fighting

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<sup>8</sup> The Golden Age of comics is how the period between the late 1930's and the early 1950's is called, due to the influence, importance and amount of sales of comic books, mainly the superhero genre.

the Soviets and, at the same time, fighting internal menaces like other superheroes that do not agree with the policies applied. In the following image, there is a representation of Clark Kent talking to Bruce Wayne, asking the latter to keep calm and avoid going too far in his crusade against criminals.



Fig.13 Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 2002, page 118.

At the same time, it is possible to see Wayne's thoughts about Kent and a small TV screen showing the opening of the news, which will talk about the war, and seconds later Superman is flying to help. Superman is shown in the foreground of the scene, looking majestic. However, he is represented as nothing more than the presidential particular weapon; he is not the hero who saves the U.S. people like in his

own stories. In this narrative, Superman represents the mistakes made by the government and he should pay for that, as in the final confrontation between him and Batman. In this final scene, Superman is following presidential orders to kill Gotham's vigilante who is trying to solve crime problems by himself, breaking the law. Miller believes that the criminals should be fought no matter what. Thus, he makes Batman win the battle, representing the defeat of Superman as the defeat of that model of government. Wayne even pretends to die by heart attack, taking some medicine, like Juliet in the Shakespearean play. He is forced to do that because the government has a plan B: if Superman loses the fight, snipers would finish the job.



Fig.14 Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 2002, page 196.

Superman loses as a partial journalist and as a partial hero. Because of that, he ought to lose in Miller's narrative. In this sense, Batman represents the will to do what the State does not do, while Superman represents State's interests.

### 3. Final Remarks

The elements in the two analysed comics represent the ideal of a new perception of time, in which the teleological future heading toward progress does not make sense, but the concept of a catastrophic future, based in situations and expectations from the present makes the present itself the most important time. Modern concepts and institutions are no longer prestigious, and their ideals are falling apart. Those issues were presented in the discussion as they appeared as important matters in *Batman* and *Ranxerox*, in greater or lesser extent.

Batman and Ranxerox are characters created in different time and space, but the first one lived long enough to share the same context with the Italian android. The encounter in time between the characters happen in a moment of great changes; a moment in which people begin to recognize and perceive that a new way of understanding time is arising, leaving Modernity aside and starting a post-modern period. The representations and their implications of this shift in this historical period was the main point of this study.

The perception that a “liquid modernity” had arrived was not only felt by U.S. authors, but in all Western society it is possible to see the echoes of this process taking place. *Ranxerox* presents a stereotype of a society in which modern technological apparatuses, in term of new tools and machines’ development, are transforming in something else. Even an android, theoretically an improved human in all terms, is highly detached from a modern concept of society. The narrative also shows that institutions, as the modern and State have cracked. In Batman’s Gotham City, Modernity is present in the structure of the city, but the institutions that should be supporting the society in Western concept have failed, as in its Italian counterpart.

Both narratives are based on the lack of social participation of the State, mainly to prevent the fear in their citizens. According to Bauman, Postmodernity is the reproduction of fear, as “the specter of social degradation against which the social State swore to protect its citizens has been replaced by the political formula of the “personal safety state” by the threats of a free pedophile, of a serial killer, an obtrusive beggar, a mugger, stalker, poisoner, terrorist” (BAUMAN, 2007, p. 21)<sup>9</sup>. Both in Batman’s and in Ranxerox’s stories there is the presence of this element of fear. This is one of the main elements in *The Dark Knight Returns*, while its absence in Ranxerox screams for a response from the absent figure of the State in face of a violent city.

What the two stories have in common, even in different approaches, is the fact that they represent the time in which they were produced, the period of the beginning of the Postmodernity, marked by the decay of modern institutions and moral codes. No old modern books of rules are followed by those two societies, as they became outdated, and more than that, nothing was left in its place to keep together the fragments of a modern society. Every institution was attacked: political posts and politicians, police force, media, moral and values. What has remained standing gained another meaning, like the Colosseum; even with its solid structure of bricks and marble, it was transformed into a hotel due to the liquid modernity, changing the core and essence of everything.

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<sup>9</sup> Translated from: “*O espectro da degradação social contra o qual o Estado social jurou garantir seus cidadãos está sendo substituído na forma a política do “Estado da proteção pessoal ” pelas ameaças de um pedófilo à solta, de um serial killer, de um mendigo atrevido, de um assaltante, de um molestatador, envenenador, terrorista.*”

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