X-Men as J Men:  
The Jewish Subtext of a Comic Book Movie

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Abstract
The recent movie X-Men (2000) reflects the assimilationist aims, ethnic anxieties, and liberal idealism of the first-generation Jewish Americans who created the original superheroes featured in Marvel Comic Books. Their rejection of Nazi racism, abhorrence of the Holocaust, and support of the Civil Rights Movement motivated them to make Magneto, the antagonist of the X-Men, a Jewish Holocaust survivor who reasonably fears that a new race of mutants like himself may face persecution and eventual extermination if they do not mount a preemptive strike against paranoid humans intent on suppressing the threat posed by beings with special powers. The X-Men follow a mutant who advocates acculturation and the channeling of their superhuman abilities to defend humankind. Bryan Singer, the Jewish director of the movie, has retained the encounter with the Holocaust and the struggle against bigotry as key themes in his film. He also has associated these themes with other instances of past or present manifestations of mass hysteria and discrimination in American politics. Thus, the movie can be understood on two levels: superficially, it is a special effects, action adventure, science fiction movie that appeals to teenagers; substantively, it is an allegory about the continuing debate over whether the United States should promote ethnic, racial, and religious equality and diversity or whether it should become a more homogenous and less multicultural society.

What does a science fiction movie based on a comic book series read primarily by adolescents have to do with the modern Jewish experience? The opening scene of the film depicts a Jewish boy being separated from his parents at a German death camp in Poland during World War II. Without this glimpse into how the Holocaust scarred the childhood of the movie's villain Magneto, the audience would have no insight into his obsession to supplant humankind with a race of mutants like himself who possess special powers. Furthermore, the cartoonists who created X-Men and the director of the film are all Jewish Americans who champion acculturation as a strategy for minority groups while simultaneously condemning bigotry and ethnocentrism. Finally, the movie features incidents and settings that symbolize the dialectic in American history between the ideal of equality before the law and the history of state-sanctioned discrimination. Although some critics lambasted X-Men for "trivializing the Holocaust," 1 David Denby
The creators of the *X-Men* comic book series belong to the generation of American-born Jews who sought acceptance and social mobility through assimilation. Their childhood Americanization, the rise of Nazism in Germany, and World War Two provided the formative experiences which shaped both their faith in American democracy and their fear of the demagogic appeal of antisemitism and racism.

Jacob Kurtzberg was born in 1917 to a family of Austrian Jews who had settled on the Lower East Side of New York. He recalled that he desperately "wanted to break out of the ghetto," and his talent as an illustrator enabled him to achieve this goal. He initially signed his work as an animator and comic strip artist with several Gentile sounding names before he decided to call himself Jack Kirby. Kirby collaborated with Joe Simon of Timely Comics, the forerunner of Marvel Comics, to create Captain America. The cover page of the first issue of *Captain America*, which hit the stands in March of 1941, showed the patriotic superhero clad in a red, white, and blue costume punching Hitler in the face while German soldiers fired their guns in vain to protect their Fuehrer. The casting of the Third Reich as the archenemy of the United States had been a consistent theme in Marvel publications since 1940, in part because its owner Martin Goodman and many of its staff members were Jewish. Drafted into the Army in 1943, Kirby ended up being dispatched to the European Front shortly after D-Day. Scouting occupied German territory in 1945, he met an elderly Jewish man who led him to a small labor camp where the emaciated inmates, mostly Polish Jews, had been abandoned by the camp's guards. As he told this story to an interviewer over 40 years later, Kirby remarked, "Just thinking about it makes my stomach turn. All I could say was, 'Oh God.'"

Stan Lee's parents were Romanian Jews who immigrated to the United States and resided in New York City. At the age of 17 years old, Stanley Lieber was hired in 1940 by Timely Comics to assist Simon and Kirby in the preparation of the first installments of *Captain America* because Lieber's cousin was married to the company's owner Martin Goodman. He rapidly rose from being a proofreader and errand boy to writing dialogue for comic books. He adopted the moniker of Stan Lee for his storyboards because he aspired to write "the great American novel" and did not want to besmirch his real name with what he considered "silly little comics." Several months prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Lee incorporated Timely's crusade against Nazism in his first original character, the Destroyer, a superhero dedicated to defeating the Third Reich. When Kirby and Simon left Timely to work for rival DC Comics, Lee was promoted at Timely to the position of editor and art director. He enlisted in the Army in 1942 where he eventually served as a screenwriter for training films. Lee returned to Marvel Comics in 1945 and subsequently authored a pamphlet about the company's prewar and wartime "policy of telling the readers the truth about the Nazi menace."

Rejoining the Marvel Comics staff in the late 1950s, Kirby teamed up with Stan Lee in the early 1960s to launch a slew of successful new comic book series including *The Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *The Mighty Thor*. In 1963 Kirby and Lee devised the premise of the *X-Men*. The X-men were endowed with a variety of superhuman telepathic and physical powers which resulted from either random genetic mutations or exposure to radioactivity. Aiming to attract adolescents who could identify with such outsiders, Kirby and Lee depicted the key X-Men as teenagers whose unnatural abilities first manifested themselves during puberty.
When the public in the X-Men stories became alarmed by these "freaks" of nature, a political movement emerged to register them and restrict their civil rights. Erik Magnus Lehnsherr, aka Magneto, was a Jewish mutant whose entire family perished in the Holocaust, as portrayed in the opening scene of the X-Men movie. He believed history would repeat itself unless the mutants struck first and genetically transformed homo sapiens into mutants to abolish the disparities that fanned the flames of human prejudice. The dialogue in the X-Men Comic books is more explicit than the film in forging the linkage between the slaughter of European Jewry and Magneto's paranoia about the eventual fate of the mutants if human speciesism is left unchecked. For example, in one issue of the series, Magneto comments, "I endured one death camp in Auschwitz. I will not see another people fear what they do not understand and destroy what they fear." Magneto generated enormous magnetic force fields that could collapse anything constructed with steel and deflect bombs, bullets, and missiles in mid-air.

Dr. Charles Xavier functioned as Magneto's nemesis. As the son of a nuclear technician, Dr. X was exposed to radiation that left his brain with amazing telepathic powers. Though mentally superior, Xavier is confined to a wheelchair, having lost the use of his legs in a childhood accident. Whether Kirby or Lee intended it, they devised a Gentile hero who fit the traditional stereotype of Jewish males as intellectuals with weak bodies. In the comic book series, Dr. X originally met Magneto in Israel where the latter worked in a psychiatric hospital for Holocaust survivors. The doctor envisaged a world in which mutants and humans could live in harmony, but failed to convince the embittered Magneto that humans would not persecute the mutants whose superior abilities threatened their dominance of Earth. While Magneto organized the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants to overthrow humankind, Dr. X founded a school to teach mutant teenagers, in his words, "to learn to use our powers for the benefit of mankind. . . . to help those who would distrust us if they knew of our existence!"

Dr. X's mission to acculturate the mutants and train them to defend their host society mirrors the integrationist strategies pursued by many of the first generation of Jews born in America. Mathew Smith has argued that the ethnic minorities who dreamed up the original comic book superheroes projected their own social insecurities onto their creations by depicting them as aliens or physically distinctive beings who gladly relinquished "their heritage, in part or in full, for assimilation into the American melting pot." The longing to fit in stemmed not only from memories of persecution in the Old Country, but also from the exacerbation of American antisemitic sentiments by the Bolshevik Revolution, the Great Depression, and the appeasement of Nazi Germany between the two World Wars. This historical context lends plausibility to Helena Frenkil Schlam's thesis that "feelings of Jewish anxiety" motivated Jewish cartoonists like Stan Lee and Jack Kirby "to imagine a solution—the existence of all-powerful protectors for the vulnerable in society."

American Jewish sympathy for the mainstream of the Civil Rights Movement also left its mark on the characters and plots of X-Men and other Marvel comic books. Stuart Svonkin traces the identification of many American Jews with the African-American struggle for political equality to the postwar theory postulated by progressive social scientists that European antisemitism and American racism had similar psychological and social roots which produced demeaning stereotypes, discriminatory legislation, and violence against minority groups. Stan Lee articulated this liberal point of view in a 1965 "soapbox" column about the politics of Marvel Comic Books:

"We'd like to go on record about one vital issue—we believe that man has a divine
destiny, and an awesome responsibility—the responsibility of treating all who share this wondrous world of ours with tolerance and respect—judging each fellow human on his own merit, regardless of race, creed, or color." 19

In keeping with the original Civil Rights message of the X-Men comic books, the Executive Producer of the movie described the ideological and tactical differences between Dr. X and Magneto as analogous to those between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. 20

For those who might object to a Holocaust survivor being cast as a villain, it is important to keep in mind that Magneto is not an innately evil man seeking world domination. Instead, he is a victim of a previous genocide who reasonably anticipates that paranoid humans will subject the mutants to the same fate European Jewry experienced during World War Two. As Kathrin Bower has observed, the respect accorded [End Page 48] Holocaust survivors makes Magneto a more sympathetic character than most comic book villains. 21

In the early 1970s Marvel added more diverse leading characters to its pantheon of comic book heroes including the African Black Panther, the African-American Luke Cage, the Native American Red Wolf, the Asian Kung Fu master Shang-Chi, and female superheroes like The Cat and Shanna the She-Devil. This trend carried over into the second generation of X-men and women who were introduced in 1975. The new members counted among their ranks a black woman named Storm who could control the weather, a Russian peasant named Colossus whose skin could change into steel, and a volatile Canadian nicknamed Wolverine whose power of physical regeneration made him a guinea pig for a Canadian Army experiment to graft an unbreakable metal alloy and retractable claws to his skeleton. 22

Born in 1966, Bryan Singer, the director of X-Men, grew up in an era when the Holocaust increasingly entered American consciousness through public education and the mass media. Though the popularization of the Shoah had begun earlier, the broadcast of NBC's miniseries Holocaust in 1978 served as the greatest impetus in raising the general awareness of Americans about the event. 23 Singer's first two films, Public Access and The Usual Suspects, were both explorations of the maliciousness of their main characters. 24 Singer admits that he found the subject of the Holocaust, "fascinating, especially growing up as a Jewish kid, . . . the sheer terror of the people who perpetrated it." 25

He based his third movie Apt Pupil on Stephen King's novella about a teenager whose study of the Holocaust alerts him to the presence of a Nazi war criminal residing in his hometown. Rather than turn him over to the authorities, the boy interviews him extensively about what motivated him to kill Jews during World War Two. By not exposing the Nazi's identity, the boy becomes an accessory to his evasion of justice and eventually to a murder committed by the Nazi to prevent his arrest. The title and plot [End Page 49] of the movie suggest that anyone can learn to be an accomplice to deception and destruction. When asked why he was drawn to King's story, Singer replied that what intrigued him was "the idea that this terrible, awful thing that happened so many years ago, so many decades ago in Europe, . . . would somehow have crept up, across the ocean, through time, and into this beautiful Southern California suburban neighborhood and this seemingly normal, all-American, young man." 26

In X-Men Singer assumes the film's adolescent target audience will understand his visual references to Magneto's traumatic memory of Auschwitz. The first scene contains no dialogue and merely locates and dates the event as happening in "Poland 1944." The Jews marched into the
camp wear yellow Stars of David on their coats. Several shots of onlookers among the inmates show their striped uniforms and the numbers tattooed on their wrists. When German-speaking guards restrain young Erik from running to his mother, his rage transforms itself into a magnetic outburst that twists the frame of the iron fence. Replicating a scene from Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, Singer pans the chimney of a crematorium at Auschwitz, but stops halfway up the structure before the smoke spewing forth from its top comes into view. The next time the audience sees Magneto, he is an older man listening to a Senate hearing on a proposed law mandating the registration of mutants. Convinced that a war between mutants and people is unavoidable, he stalks out of the room where he is confronted by Dr. X, who advises him not to lose hope in mankind. Magneto responds, "I have heard these arguments before. It was a long time ago." The only other direct reference to Magneto's ordeal at Auschwitz is a glimpse of the tattooed number on his arm in a subsequent scene.  

Singer's expectation that most viewers of *X-Men* will realize that Magneto's motivations have arisen from his experiences as a survivor of the Holocaust is not unrealistic. As Jeffrey Schandler maintains, American popular culture in the last two decades has elevated the Holocaust into a "household word" which serves as a "master moral paradigm" for epitomizing the worse case scenario of institutionalizing any form of discrimination and racism as state policy. Public opinion polls conducted during the 1990s confirm how widespread awareness of the Holocaust is among Americans.  

Singer explicitly draws parallels between the Holocausts survived and connived by Magneto and chapters from U.S. history that resulted from mass hysteria and fear of groups allegedly posing a threat to the American way of life. Senator Kelly, who spearheads the movement for national and international registration of mutants, is a modern incarnation of Joseph McCarthy. The only difference is that he is obsessed with ferreting out mutants instead of communists. Waving a bunch of papers, he declares in the Senate, "I have here a list of names of identified mutants, living right here in the United States!" "Mutant Watch," a web-page publicizing the movie, reminds "conscientious Americans" that it is their "duty" "to report suspected mutants." Kelly has managed to persuade the United Nations to take up the issue of mutant registration. The three-sided conflict between Magneto, Kelly, and Dr. X culminates at a special session of the United Nations held on Ellis Island, thereby reminding the audience of the continuing American debate over free immigration versus nativist restrictionism. Near the Island, Wolverine and Magneto's minion Sabretooth duke it out atop the crown of the Statue of Liberty. After killing his formidable foe, Wolverine battles with Magneto who is lurking in Liberty's torch. The staging of the finale visually illustrates the ideological fight over whether the United States belongs only to the ancestors of the Founding Fathers or to the diverse groups who continue to immigrate here seeking freedom and equality.

To be sure, audience members in their teens, twenties, and thirties may have no personal memories or historical knowledge of the events to which Singer alludes. Yet *X-Men* encourages younger viewers to relate its themes to contemporary issues. The headlines displayed on Senator Kelly's "Mutant Watch" reveal how the movie evokes current manifestations of bigotry. There one reads about how "Badger Scouts of America" are screening out mutant applicants, how the Center for Disease Control has observed a rise in the rate of bad mutations, how health insurance has been denied to mutants, and how a superintendent has barred mutants from attending public schools in
By presenting Dr. X so much more positively than Magneto and Kelly, Singer affirms his belief "that all kinds of people should live in as much peace and harmony as humanly possible on this planet, regardless of their differences."  

The box-office success of the *X-Men* movie signaled the widespread influence this story exerts on popular culture. *X-Men* holds the distinction of being the best-selling comic book series in the history of the medium. It has inspired a television cartoon series that ran five years, several video games, a television series which premiered on the Fox Network the Fall of 2001, and the sequel *X2* released in May of 2003. Michael Chabon has acknowledged his gratitude to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby for serving as role models for characters and ideas developed in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. As Chabon remarked in an interview, Kirby, Lee, and other Jewish cartoonists from the Golden Age of comic books endowed their superheroes with the Messianic mission "to redeem the suffering and helpless of the world."  

Holocaust educators and scholars may find Singer's use of the *Shoah* as a plot device to teach lessons about the dangers of discrimination and racism as exploitative and inappropriate. Although Singer's film is more technologically sophisticated and visually spectacular than previous cinematic attempts to represent the Holocaust in science fiction, it represents a narrative mixture pioneered in episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek* and feature films like *Shadows on the Land* and *The Boys from Brazil*. Moreover, Singer's imbuing his movie with a respect for diversity and a rejection of bigotry is congruent with the film's references to the Holocaust. At a moment in history, when the United States conducts a military manhunt for Islamic terrorists who, in turn, perceive themselves as waging a Holy War against infidels, *X-Men*'s idealistic call for tolerance has become more relevant than it may have seemed three years ago when the movie premiered.

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**Footnotes**


38. Shandler, *While America Watches*, pp. 124-127, 138-140, 147-151; *Shadows on the Land*, Dir: