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Silver Lining: The Emblematic Exemplum of *Silver Surfer* #40–43 (1990)

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This article examines how the *Silver Surfer* issues #40–43 relate to the American recession in 1990 and discusses the result with regard to the superhero genre and the medieval emblematic exemplum. Similar to Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), the *Surfer* issues are a critical commentary on capitalism and American society. However, where Miller's work delivers a clear message about how ordinary people can resist an unjust regime, in the *Surfer* issues there is no victory for the ordinary citizen. Instead, the reader is consoled in a cathartic way in identifying with a superhero stripped of his powers by the system. In a historical analysis of the comic story's response-inviting devices, structure and techniques, the article demonstrates that while the issues feature traits typical of the superhero genre, they are also instances of the medieval genre of the emblematic exemplum. When read through this lens, the issues gain explanatory power in addition to their ability to move the readers. They explain what happens to society when bureaucrats take over, foreground the relation between comics and their readers and problematize the issue of what it means to be human.

"For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself,

lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls."

Hebrews 12:2–3

Introduction

Issues #40–43 remain one of the few uncollected storylines of the *Silver Surfer* comic. Written by Jim Starlin with assistance from Ron Marz (issues #42 and #43), they were published at the peak of the American recession in 1990, running from August to November. The issues comment on the American economy, bureaucracy

and core ideals such as "the American dream"—which, given the relation between these things and the superhero, makes them inherently meta-literary (see also Denison and Mizsei-Ward, 2015, pp. 6 f.).

The storyline's premise is that the near omni-potent Silver Surfer loses his powers when tricked into coming to Dynamo City—a space city and "world unto itself" (#40, p. 10). In order to leave and get his powers back, the Surfer needs to pay an exit fee. As he doesn't have any money, he needs to get in line and try to find a job, like any ordinary citizen.

The superhero losing his powers is a staple plot device in the genre, iconically exemplified by Superman when exposed to kryptonite. What makes these issues stand out is the immediate and explicit connection between the loss of power and the lack of employment. I will explore this connection in a historical analysis using a fusion of post-classical narratology and modern genre theory.

Post-classical narratology deals with how stories are construed, not only as texts (as in classic narratology) but vis-à-vis readers, as structures, devices and techniques inviting response (Herman, 2013). Similarly, and following Cathryn Miller's ground-breaking work on genre theory, modern literary genre theory tends to stress the importance of the author–reader eco-systems. Genres grow into formalized answers to historical social needs, as collectively owned sediments of many texts (C. R. Miller, 1984, pp. 163–165 and 2015; Bawarshi, 2003, pp. 1–44).

Neither post-classical narratology nor genre ecologies suggest that a work of literature contains or dictates particular responses. But both foreground the relation between work and reader, where the former invites reactions from the latter and has the potential to answer specific needs in a given historical situation. You could say that the work "wants" to affect its reader. My hope is that this perspective can explain the connection between loss of power and lack of employment in the comic issues at hand. The questions I want to answer in the article are: what did this *Silver Surfer* story want with the autumn 1990 reader, and how did it go about it?

First, I provide some background and previous research about the *Silver Surfer* and describe the plot in issues #40–43. In the analysis that follows, I deal with the

underlying story structure and its roots in medieval and renaissance literature, with the loss of superpowers, income and dreams as well as with the (fallen) superhero's fight against bureaucracy and state power. I point to an actual intradiegetic lesson that the Surfer's enemy means to teach him, but also to a didactic intent that is based on the story's structure and further fuelled by the historical context of the comic and its contemporary readers. In the discussion of the analytical results, I suggest that the genre composition in the issues is dominated by a medieval, religious genre—the *emblematic exemplum*—rather than the superhero genre. This perspective adds intertextual depth to the relation between the issues and their contemporary readers, and may also be useful for future discussions about superhero comics and their historical roots.

Background

This *Silver Surfer* storyline is predated by just a few years by Frank Miller's groundbreaking *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). Miller's comic has been analysed at length by Grant Morrison and several others (Morrison, 2012; Klock, 2002; Bongco, 2000). It marked a realistic, critical and political turn for the superhero genre, which stood out starkly against the background of the contemporary Reagan Era and the Comics Code Authority's (CCA) censorship of comics that, while gradually eroding since its inception in 1954, was still in place in 1986 (Gavaler, 2018, pp. 9 f.). In his analysis of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Morrison demonstrates how the superheroes in the comic are drawn to their logical conclusions: Superman, once an ideal response to reader needs in the wake of the Great Recession, has become a weapon in the hands of a Reagan-ish regime, the equivalent of the same nuclear threat that he has been thwarting since 1945. Batman on the other hand never had any powers, but he is no longer the young and handsome playboy; rather, he is an aging man whose physical and psychological health issues have finally caught up with him. The government decides to use Superman against Batman when he goes to new extremes in the fight against Gotham's criminals. In an epic show-down, Batman channels the entire electric energy of Gotham in a punch to Superman's gut, effectively beating him (while

also faking his own death). The story ends with Batman proving his point—that the "normal man" can beat the "ideal man" and a corrupt government (Morrison, 2012, Ch. 1).

In *Silver Surfer* issues #40–43, Miller's influence is evident in theme and motif, and through Morrison's analysis, it is easy to see how the post-CCA superhero genre, as embodied in these issues, relates on the most basic level to its readers: the conflict between a corrupt government and normal man is at the core of the story, and just like in *The Dark Knight Returns*, the issues get a tangible and immediate meaning in relation to the historical situation of their production. But there are also important differences present from the outset as they are built into the Silver Surfer character.

The Silver Surfer is one of the most extreme superheroes in the Marvel stable. He is comparable in power to Superman, but he is more alien and aloof to earthly perspectives. The hero is famous for his poetic language, his humourless perspectives and melodramatic flashbacks, for paraphrasing the Bible and even quoting Nietzsche.

There are plenty of references to the *Silver Surfer* in comics research, but most are brief footnotes. In one of the few articles that deals with the Surfer at length, Jean-Paul Gabilliet focuses on the Surfer's messianic attributes and emphasizes the importance of submission, sacrifice and morality in the Surfer storyline during 1968–1970. In essence, for the Surfer, "personal desire is subordinate to submission to political power, which in turn is always superseded by morality," meaning that the core of the gestalt—as Gabilliet sees it in his article—is to do the right thing despite the cost to oneself and, ultimately, regardless of what the political order might be (Gabilliet, 1994, p. 207).

The storyline that Gabilliet bases his conclusions on is the genesis of the *Silver Surfer* comic: a scientist named Norinn Radd lives on a far-away planet called Zenn-La, which is threatened by Galactus, a being of tremendous power and a devourer of planets. To save Zenn-La, Radd promises to become Galactus' Herald, helping him to find new planets to devour. Galactus accepts, and turns Radd into the Silver Surfer, making him lose much of his humanity in the process. When the Surfer reaches

Earth and encounters the Fantastic Four, he re-discovers some of his humanity and decides to oppose Galactus, who flees but imprisons his Herald on Earth.

As we shall see, this genesis is structurally replicated in issues #40–43, and most of the things that Gabilliet says about the Silver Surfer remain true. However, the plotline also makes strong use of another core genre device, namely "loss of property." This was once identified by Umberto Eco as one of the basic premises of the whole superhero genre. Behind the struggle against the arbitrary laws of a bureaucratic and unfair society lies the simple fact that someone has taken something from the hero or from someone he or she protects (Eco and Chilton, 1972, p. 22).[1] This is true of issues #40–43. The Silver Surfer loses his powers, but also his dignity, his self-esteem, a job, his dreams and the two measly credits (i.e. the little money) he earns. And bureaucracy is to blame for all of it.

But there is more at stake than these losses, and perhaps more importantly so. The metaphorical relation between fiction and real world is more political than what is common—clearly not on the small scale that Eco demonstrates for the 50s Superman comic. And while the Surfer gestalt is an extreme version of the type of self-righteous and aloof Superman that Batman opposes in *The Dark Knight Returns*, the Surfer doesn't deal with corruption and injustice as a superhero or person of immense wealth, but as a fallen angel and a powerless vagrant down on his luck, striking back from the very bottom of society. As Singer remarks, superhero comics started becoming more political in the early 70s and continued down that road in the 80s. *The Dark Knight Returns* is again a very striking example, but these Silver Surfer issues still stand out (2013, p. 358). The reader column in issue #43 contains a letter from one Larry Feldman, who had just read issue #40 and testifies to these qualities:

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[1] Eco's text "The Myth of Superman" was published in Italian in 1962 and then translated (with revisions) into English in 1972. Consequently, it isn't based on the later development of the Superman character, and as Marc Singer has pointed out, fails to take the early appearances in the 1930s into account. Nevertheless, many of Eco's observations about the mechanisms and consequences of time suspension, information redundancy, plot repetition and character status quo remain interesting in the analysis of new comics. (Eco and Chilton, 1972; Singer, 2013, p. 357)

> And the thing I liked about issue #40 was that Jim [Starlin] really shows that he understands the potential of the SILVER SURFER as a commentator or even a satire on the foibles of modern society. […] Dynamo City is an excellent example of this. It is the ultimate bureaucracy with catch 22's abounding and stifling inappropriate rules that serve a system that works only for those in power. I can't wait until next issue to see Norrin [i.e. the Surfer] grind through the social welfare system trying to find a job for which he is either overqualified or underexperienced. And he doesn't even have a social security number! (p. 31)

In the following, we shall see how this and similar reader reactions are orchestrated through the story structure, its focalized protagonist, its intertexts and its play with genre conventions.

The Plotline in Issues #40–43

Issues #40–43 start shortly after Gabilliet's material ends. The Surfer has managed to flee Earth and is roaming free in the cosmos after having bested another major enemy, Thanos. The Surfer is approached by a robot representative of Dynamo City asking him to participate in an investigation of Thanos's death. It turns out that Thanos was a citizen of Dynamo City and mentions his arch enemy—the Surfer—in his last will. Intrigued, the Surfer decides to follow the robot. As soon as he comes within city bounds, his powers are drained from him, and he now realizes why the city has gotten its "dynamo" name: it is an accumulator of power, and he won't get his powers back until he leaves.

The Surfer has no money to pay the city exit fee, and without his powers he has no valuable skills. He manages to get a job in construction, but it turns out his metal skin heats up in the sun, making him drop the beams he is supposed to carry. He is soon fired without pay. At a loss, the Surfer goes to the outer rim of the city where he finds a shanty town filled with jobless people who are also unable to leave Dynamo City. They tell the Surfer of a place in the city where he can sell his memories and dreams as entertainment for the rich.

The Surfer finds the place and signs a contract. All his feelings and memories are displayed through a cinematic device in front of an eager audience. The Surfer feels

exploited, and in the end, it turns out that he earns nothing for it after fees and taxes are paid.

Frustrated, the Surfer wants to meet with the city ruler: "the Great I." It turns out that this is in fact a great *eye*, but blind and without real power. Everything is in the hands of the bureaucrats. The Silver Surfer is sentenced to death for his protests and is thrown out into space without a life-support system. However, this restores his powers. The storyline ends with a fellow Shanty Town citizen convincing him to hold back his revenge on the city, and the Surfer swears to return.

The Story's Structure

The structural relationship between a big city and a shanty town at its outskirts or lowest levels is a common feature of just about any genre that deals with class oppositions, such as the hard-boiled crime novel or the cyberpunk story. The connection between these places and the tension between them as polar opposites of endless luxury and destitution feed the story with conflict. In both genres, the reader is commonly taken from the violence of the streets into the morally corrupt upper-class society. The structure supports a reader and protagonist journey that *unmasks* society. It is didactic, there to demonstrate that these differences are unfair and how those who live in better places aren't necessarily better people. In the works of Dashiell Hammet, for example, the didactic intent is achieved through realism bordering on naturalism (Malmgren, 1997, pp. 118–127), while in cyberpunk, a similar effect is achieved through the exaggeration of architectural vertical space. In his article "Vertical Noir: Histories of the Future in Urban Science Fiction," Stephen Graham shows how class differences are mythologized in this manner to build cognitive estrangement (2016, p. 390).

In issues #40–43, however, this structure is but one of the compartments that encase the story, much like in a Russian doll. First there is infinite space, where the Surfer has all his powers. Then there is the closed-in Dynamo City, where those powers are stripped from him. Then there is Shanty Town for those who—like the Surfer—cannot make it in Dynamo City. And, finally, there is prison—the most constrained place of all—where those sentenced to death through spacing (i.e. getting thrown out in space) are locked up. The plot takes the Surfer through all of these compartments.

In a way, the Surfer serves as a (Dantean) Virgil, guiding the reader on a journey that is both spiritual and politically mundane: each of the compartments have equivalents in some aspect of Christian and urban life. The Christian subject is removed from the presence of God (space) and brought to earthly life (Dynamo City) where he must endure hardships until all sense of self is stripped and he is truly humble and powerless before God. Only then can he be miraculously restored. The urbanite leaves his country's freedom, having been tempted and intrigued by the possibilities of the Big City. He is certain of his ability to handle the city, but soon finds that he can't. His dreams are worthless and laughable, and in addition, he is incapable of leaving. Instead of reaching the top, he ends up at the bottom, in the gutter or the slums. The only freedom left is death.

This journey is distinctly vertical and has older roots than the structure's connections to the Great Recession or the similarities with the crime and cyberpunk genres. In Homer's *Odyssey,* Odysseus needs answers from the Underworld before being able to continue on his quest to reach Ithaca. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas journeys into the Underworld to learn about the will of the gods and the future of Rome. In Dante's *La Divina Commedia,* the narrator is lost, and Virgil guides him and the reader on a journey through the planes of existence, starting with the descent into Hell. As demonstrated by Bruce Louden in his study of Homer, all of these descents are didactic examples of the mythic *catabasis* (2011, p. 198). This is a descent of some kind which is necessary in order to see or learn, to be able to move forward. And in the cases of Virgil and Dante in particular, what can be seen is also political. Their epics are well known to introduce certain moral values into their respective historical contexts and allude extensively to people, places and politics in their time. In *La Divina Commedia,* the political aspect of the *Aeneid* is one of the reasons why Virgil is the guide when the narrator, through the descent into Hell, learns what happens to people in a society governed by greed and selfishness (see Ferrante, 2014, pp. 132–140).

To Gabilliet's *Silver Surfer* theme of submission for the greater good, these issues add a deeply pessimistic outlook on human life in western, urban capitalism. The superhero genre may have had its first major impact in the wake of the Great Recession in the 1930s, and a similar relation between the big city and the slums can be found in both the Batman and Superman comics (Russel, 2009, pp. 218–221).

The *Silver Surfer* issues #40–43 are an intertextual commentary on these beginnings similar to *The Dark Knight Returns*. But the story structure is also grounded in older narratives, which are similarly trying to tell their readers something about a contemporary society. And in these 1990 issues, the statement isn't "the ordinary citizen must beat a fascist, ultra-violent government" like in Miller's comic. It is more like the medieval/renaissance exemplum: "look at this unfair society and what it does to the ordinary citizen."

The Job Interview

But what does "ordinary citizen" mean, and how is that meaning separated from "superhuman?" While lacking the ability to do superhuman or godlike things, a person can still be empowered by way of love, dreams, health, having a job, etc.—privileges or gifts that in turn can be lost to alter an individual from a happy to a miserable state. The sequence in #41 where the Surfer applies for a job, fails in manual labour and ends up in Shanty Town is a brief seven pages (cover page and pp. 1–8, excluding pages 5 and 7, which are ads). But as we shall see, they are packed with symbolic language and imagery.

In **Figure 1**, the Surfer stands in line with a diverse array of aliens. Only one of them looks remotely human, but clearly isn't. In fact, in the entire storyline, the only humans are the ones that the Surfer remembers from his time on Earth. This is important because it strengthens the allegorical quality of the issues. The aliens aren't representatives of man's *other*, but of man's own self. This is emphasized in the conversation on page 1, which establishes both the Surfer and the aliens as representatives of the ordinary citizen. In the full-page panel, they are greyed out (in red), as they are shadowed by the great Dynamo City, which is bright and drawn like a typical New York cityscape. The whole scene taken as a composite *iconotext* is emblematic, strongly reminiscent of the photographs of employment lines during the Great Recession. The term "iconotext" is originally from Hallberg (1982, pp. 163–168), designating text and image as parts of a whole but with different relations in different works. The parts can enhance, contradict or complement one another. In this particular scene, they complement *and* enhance one another. The scene is also a perfect example of the previously mentioned exaggerated vertical architecture, symbolizing

Figure 1: *The Silver Surfer #41.* New York: Marvel, 1990, p. 1. Jim Starlin (writer), Ron Lim (penciler), Tom Christopher (inker), Ken Bruzenak (letterer), Tom Vincent (colorist), Craig Anderson (editor), Tom Defalco (Chief). © 1990 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc.].

hierarchy and tension between classes, heralding the vertical journey that the protagonist is about to make. The art deco inspired rocket shape in the middle of the page stresses the striving upward quality of the city, while the speech balloons force the reader to lower the gaze towards the people at the bottom, where the light doesn't reach. One of the balloons is put into focus by the upper arc (a road) bisecting the image and connecting with the balloon: "What you doin' in this line?" Given all of these qualities, the first page immediately establishes a connection between the fictional world and the historical and contemporary reality of the readers' world.

While the humanity of the Surfer and the aliens is emphasized in this manner, the *inhumanity* of the officials in the employment office is emphasized by the fact that they are all robots—from the machine interviewing the Surfer to the security guard who throws him out. Again, this choice runs through the entire storyline: Any individual in a position of power or who is a representative of bureaucracy or the state, is an artificial creature. Here, Eco's initial observations about the reader's needs behind the superhero genre also come to mind:

> Individual strength, if not exerted in sports activities, is left abased when confronted with the strength of machines which determine man's very movements. In such a society the positive hero must embody to an unthinkable degree the power demands that the average citizen nurtures but cannot satisfy (Eco and Chilton, 1972, p. 14).

However, as Klock points out using Batman as example, the superhero's adversaries also serve to point out aspects of the superhero. Just as Two-Face in *Batman* points to the superhero's schizophrenia, the machines in these issues point to the aloofness and inhumanity that is part of the Silver Surfer gestalt (2002, p. 36). But the main function of the machines is to depict the system as inhumane, which in turn makes the struggling Surfer all the more human (despite his metallic appearance). The robot in the employment office is less than impressed when the Surfer states that his "last job was … well … as the Herald of mighty Galactus" (#41, p. 2).

Figure 2 is rife with irony, as the qualities that previously set the Surfer apart as something special and wondrous—his herald status and his origin on Zenn-La—means

Figure 2: *The Silver Surfer #41.* New York: Marvel, 1990, p. 3. Jim Starlin (writer), Ron Lim (penciler), Tom Christopher (inker), Ken Bruzenak (letterer), Tom Vincent (colorist), Craig Anderson (editor), Tom Defalco (Chief). © 1990 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc.

literally nothing in this context. The machine doesn't care about any special circumstances and makes no effort to view the Surfer as an individual. Notably, the robot is shaded, has a visor hiding its eyes and uses square speech balloons. The Surfer on the other hand is sparkling white, shows his eyes and uses rounded balloons. They are depicted as opposites, and the machine's concluding "Qualifications: none" confirms this in a distinctly instrumental and computer-like manner. The middle right panel on this page is special, as only part of the image is framed. The rightmost part bleeds into the gutter and into the reader's world, and the speech balloons that have been placed there present the Surfer's core dilemma: "With my cosmic powers, yes. Manually? Well, I'm not sure." Although the scene is set on a space station in the Marvel fictional universe, and while there are only non-humans involved, the scene emphasizes and brings into clarity a situation that is all too easy to recognize for contemporary readers in 1990. While the recession was mild compared to previous American recessions, statistics show that it entailed job losses on a demographically broader front than previous recessions, as well as an unusual amount of *permanent* job losses (Brown and Pagan, 1998).

The Dreamers of Shanty Town

After failing at manual labour at a construction site and being stopped for vagrancy by the Dynamo City police, the Surfer has nowhere to go but to Shanty Town (as the Surfer calls it—the narrator calls it "a tent city"), where he encounters others who are in similar situations. If the journey from space to the bottom of the city's society represents the previously mentioned *catabasis* in a medieval/renaissance reading of the story, Shanty Town becomes the equivalent of the Underworld *topos.*

As we shall see in the second last panel in **Figure 3**, one of its denizens explicitly calls it "hell." Just like in *La Divina Commedia,* it is the place where the didactic intent of the story can be realized through what the protagonist sees, and where the arguments for the story as a political commentary can be gathered. There are three people in Shanty Town who are of special interest: a male and female couple who are dead-set on making it in Dynamo City, and Zeaklar, a friendly alien who offers the Surfer food and some advice. Both parties are there to represent different views on the relation between Shanty Town and Dynamo City.
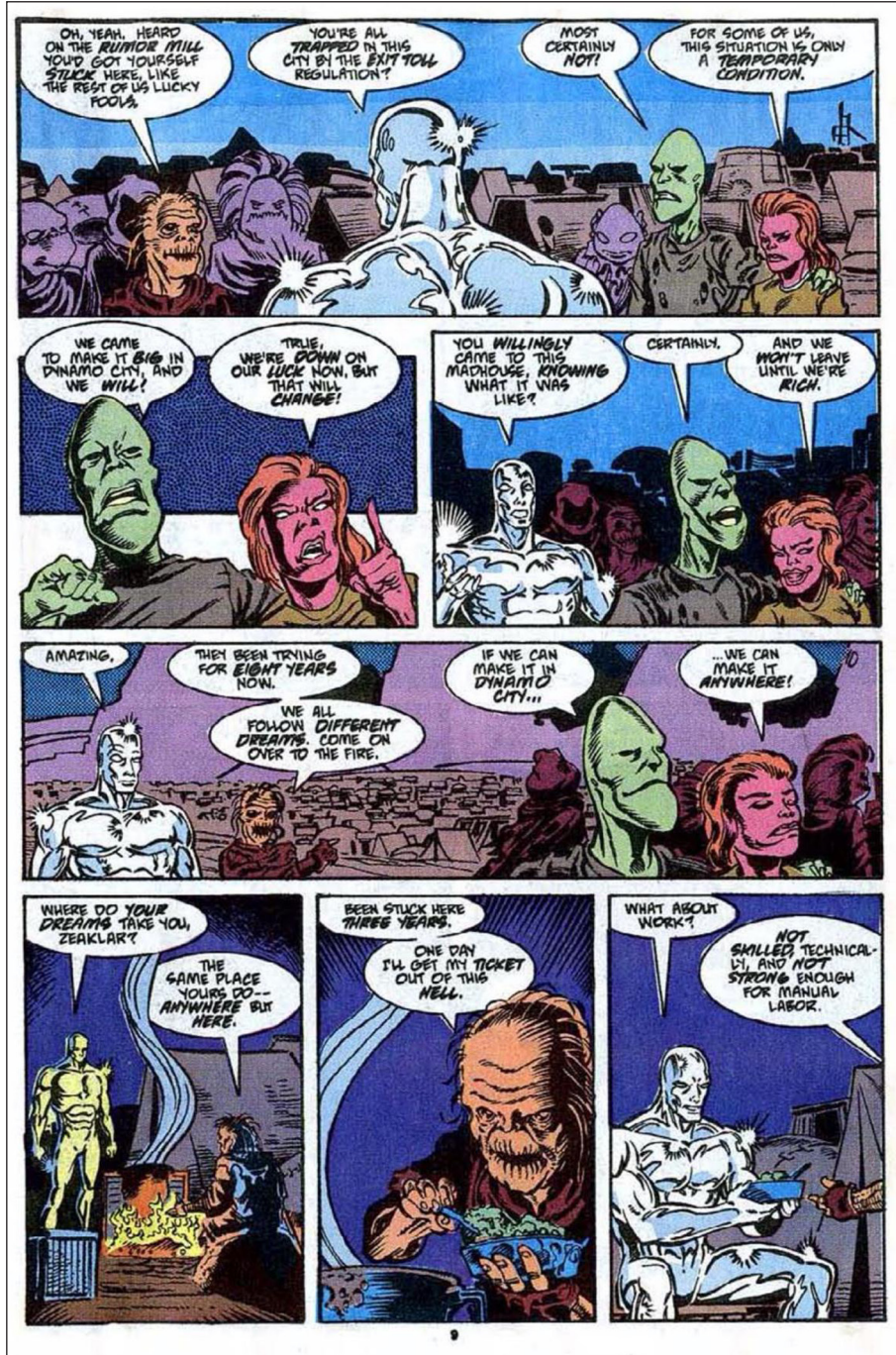
Figure 3: *The Silver Surfer #41.* New York: Marvel, 1990, p. 9. Jim Starlin (writer), Ron Lim (penciler), Tom Christopher (inker), Ken Bruzenak (letterer), Tom Vincent (colorist), Craig Anderson (editor), Tom Defalco (Chief). © 1990 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc.

In the initial panel in **Figure 3**, the Surfer is put in the middle of two Shanty Town camps: those who acknowledge being stuck (to the left) and those who don't (to the right). The latter are very particular about how they should be viewed by others. Their condition is emphasized as "temporary," and their conviction and parting words are of course a paraphrase of Fredd Ebb's lyrics in the theme song for the 1977 blockbuster *New York, New York*. Scorcese's film is in many ways a bittersweet tribute to the director's home town, but in this scene in issue #41, the couple nourishing this dream are depicted as shallow with a superior attitude, and in denial of the fact that if they were going to make it—they would have already.

In the second panel, they have been given classic rhetorical poses, a clenched fist and a lifted finger, and in the fourth panel, their closed mouths and lifted chins simultaneously signal superiority and determination. The vertical aspect of the story structure is subtly represented in the woman first saying "down on our luck" and then paraphrasing Ebb's song, which among other things include the line "king of the hill." In the context of the comic, they represent the delusion that society is fair, that everyone has the same chance at success and that those who work at it in earnest will eventually achieve it.

Zeaklar, on the other hand, has a different view on things, and his name hints at how the reader should understand his perspective—"Zeaklar" being similar to "see clearly."[2] He is indeed the person in the *topos* who sees through the mechanics of Dynamo City, and through the encounter with him the Surfer starts learning how things work:

"Who is in charge of this madhouse?"

"Someone called the Great I. No one ever sees the dude. He runs Dynamo City through his bureaucracy of robots and high rollers. It's all set up so the rich get richer and the poor stay that way. They're always spouting a bunch of propaganda about everyone having a chance to make it in their free enterprise system … but it's only the insiders that ever get ahead" (#41, p. 10).

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[2] It is even closer to the same meaning in Scandinavian languages ("se klart") and in German ("klar sehen"). In issue #43, it is revealed that Zeaklar's full name is "Zeaklar Flatius Belgewater"—a pun based on flatulence and "belch water." The latter is 1930s slang for seltzer water (carbonated water).

The quotation encapsulates the core problem that drives the story in issues #40–43: Bureaucracy and a dehumanized justice system controls society and feeds propaganda—the American dream—to the masses while secretly letting those who are already ahead get even richer. Zeaklar is critical of individualism, bureaucracy and capitalism, and the Surfer will come to encompass some (but not all) of his views later when he confronts the nominal ruler of Dynamo City. The quotation is also interesting in relation to Eco's criticism of the superhero genre (for not dealing with politics but only with small-scale loss of property) and in relation to *The Return of the Dark Knight*. The critique is literal and spoken by a character who is not only a kind of didactic fore-reader (i.e. showing the reader how things should be interpreted), but also the only friend the Surfer has in Dynamo City.

Selling Your Dreams

The Surfer sees no other solution than to try to sell his memories and dreams to show business. There is a "Stim Network" in the city, called "SNET," which can search people's minds and display the contents to a rich and blasé audience hungry for new, spectacular shows. The Surfer's background doesn't qualify him for a job, but it is of course unique, and he has no trouble getting a deal: He is offered 200 credits—enough to pay the Surfer's exit fee and those of an additional 39 people from Shanty Town.[3]

The Surfer is shackled to a chair and his memories and dreams are ripped from him and displayed to the audience. This is an interesting sequence, because it serves several purposes at once. The first is to provide new readers with a recap of the entire *Silver Surfer* story, from his beginnings as Norinn Radd to his days as Galactus' Herald, his imprisonment on Earth, his fight with Thanos and, finally, his arrival at Dynamo City. The second is to present a meta-commentary on the relationship between the comic superhero and his reader audience (**Figure 4**):

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[3] There are actually two fees mentioned in the storyline. In issue #40, it is 50 credits, but in issue #41, it is a mere 5 credits. The way the story is written, the latter number is probably the intended one.

Figure 4: *The Silver Surfer #41.* New York: Marvel, 1990, p. 23. Jim Starlin (writer), Ron Lim (penciler), Tom Christopher (inker), Ken Bruzenak (letterer), Tom Vincent (colorist), Craig Anderson (editor), Tom Defalco (Chief). © 1990 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc.

The Surfer's thoughts as displayed in **Figure 4** are harsh, but this isn't a comic artist speaking directly about his work. It is an internally focalized protagonist, put in a situation where his thoughts also present an author–reader allegory. The sequence is set up for the comic reader to feel compassion and to look at the story with greater care (so as not to be engaged in "jaded consumption"). The page shows the Surfer foregrounded in a upward motion, which emanates from the left eye of Galactus in the previous page. The characters in the background are all from the Surfer›s previous encounters, but his board points to a woman in red: Shalla-Bal, the Surfer›s first love on Zenn-La. Further in the background around Shalla-Bal are Nova and Mantis, his other love affairs, and next to them at the right edge of the frame are several masks of death. The way this frame is composed, the Surfer›s trajectory points to the tragic theme of sacrifice and loss in his life thus far, as previously shown by Gabilliet. It also elaborates on the emphasis in the first thought balloon, "without **tenderness** or **care.**"

There is also a third and last purpose of the "selling your dreams" sequence, which is the continued critique of Dynamo City as the incarnation of capitalism and the American dream:

> My trip down memory lane ends with my approaching Dynamo City. A pity. The audience might have found my treatment since coming here interesting and educational (#41, p. 25).

The didactic intent behind the story is made explicit ("educational") in this quotation which turns the sequence into an instructive example (very much in line with the previously quoted reader comment from Larry Feldman). It ends with the Surfer getting a mere 2 credits in payment, one percent of what he was promised. The rest goes to taxes, to management fees, to union dues, to make up and to miscellaneous costs. Infuriated, the Surfer is thrown out on the streets, where, on top of everything, he is hit on the head by the robot police, passes out and wakes up having been mugged. As the scene is placed right after the encounter with the dreamers in Shanty Town, and as the Surfer tries to get rich quickly and spectacularly in show business by selling his thoughts, dreams and feelings, the connection to the

American dream is easy to make. The scene makes use of both the illusion and the disillusion of the dream motif, which enhances its weight and serves as a reminder of the previously mentioned medieval/renaissance *catabasis*. Compared to Jim Cullen's *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (2003), the scene also relates to several core features of the American dream, such as gaining freedom, gambling everything in one go, moving up through wealth and/or hard work.

The Great I & Bureaucracy

The Surfer finally manages to see the Great I by literally breaking (as in crashing) into his office. It turns out that the ruler is only a nominal ruler, and that it is a great, blind eye.

The phrase "No one sees the Great I" has been repeated several times with small variations throughout the storyline, and in **Figure 5** the pun is revealed in full. In another classic rhetoric pose which emphasizes his nudity (arms and legs are spread) and marks his peaceful intentions (palms are turned up), the Surfer presents himself in front of the very composite image of a self-absorbed marionette and capitalist ruler: the eye is literally great, as is the bold and coloured "I" in the similarly shaped speech balloon. This Eye–I connection is symbolic of the ego, a central notion or problem in capitalist societies, first introduced by Zeaklar during his lecture in the Shanty Town scene (for the self in capitalism, see Hancock and Garner, 2015, pp. 163–165, 184–185).

Through an intricate use of simultaneous contrasts and parallels, human(oid) blindness is also fused with inhuman surveillance as the round, organic eyeball has disconnected optic nerves but is surrounded by angular, connected machines. There are of course many possible intertexts, such as in the Orwellian dystopia ("Big Brother is watching you," Orwell, 1949), the Bible ("You are the God who sees me," Genesis 16:13) or the expression "to turn a blind eye." While blindness is a very diverse and common attribute in literature through the ages, it is used here as a negative symbol of unknowing and of needing to be led by others instead of leading them. Taken as a whole, this full page panel can be read as an instructive emblem of the problem with Dynamo City.
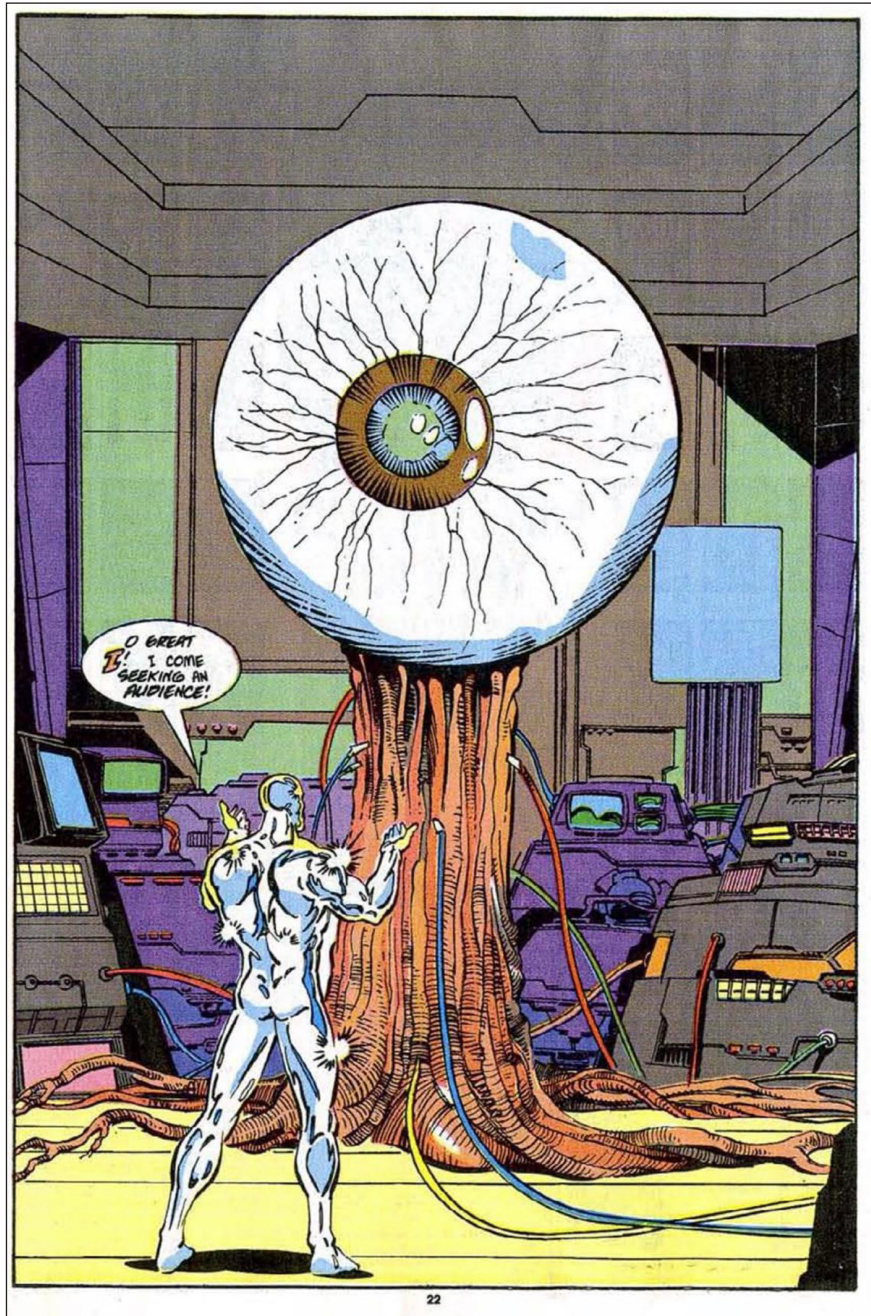
Figure 5: *The Silver Surfer #42.* New York: Marvel, 1990, p. 22. Jim Starlin & Ron Marz (writers), Ron Lim (penciler), Tom Christopher & Christopher Ivy (inkers), Ken Bruzenak (letterer), Tom Vincent (colorist), Craig Anderson (editor), Tom Defalco (Chief). © 1990 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc.

However, the Surfer doesn't understand this right away. He is in a hurry to make his plea to the leader before the security guards arrive:

O Great I! I come seeking an audience! Even back in tent city, I sensed you to be a deep and complex soul. Standing in your presence confirms that feeling. I can't believe you condone what goes on in Dynamo City. Your bureaucrats have turned this satellite into a living nightmare. They've set up laws and regulations that make life impossible for the common man. Only your executives prosper. They manipulate the system so only they can win. This is unjust, and surely something you are unaware of. I sense no evil in you, but evil is done in your name. This is a situation you must remedy. Don't allow your executives to close you off from the outside world. Seek out the common people and harvest their input. I strongly advise you to know the populace you rule. If you don't, all that you've built will eventually crumble about you, fall to ruin. History shows that no tyranny can last forever. Empires that feed off the sweat and blood of their citizens always fall. But it's not too late to change all that. You can still … you can … you … you can't hear me can you? (#42, pp. 22–24)

The Surfer now understands that the Great I is blind, deaf and mute—completely self-absorbed with no regard for his subjects, who are at the mercy of the machine bureaucrats. The above speech is interesting in how it relates to the perspectives of (the antithetical) Zeaklar and the events in Shanty Town. Zeaklar comes across as anti-capitalist and proletarian. He trades domestic work and menial tasks for food and clothes, and from his position at the bottom of society, sees through it all the way to the top.

However, for the Surfer in the above speech, the problem is not so much the difference between the rich and poor or the greed that cements those differences. The problem has to do with the laws and regulations. The dream sequence shows that this includes the union and the taxes—features that are more prominent in a socialist system than in a capitalist one. Also, the Surfer seems to have nothing against the presence of an omnipotent ruler as long as that ruler listens to the people. In this speech, he is vulnerable to Eco's critique of the 50s *Superman*, who never uses his

powers for radical political and global change (Eco and Chilton, 1972, p. 22). While the issues are highly critical of the American dream and frequently call it propaganda, they are also protective of classic liberal values: freedom to go where you please, a chance to make it on your own, freedom of rules and authorities meddling with your business.

What Does Thanos Want to Teach the Surfer?

Thanos is important in this plot and in the storyline, as he carries a strong symbolic meaning. His name is derived from *thanátos*, which is ancient Greek for "death." He is the immortal servant of the Death entity in the Marvel universe, serving her by balancing the abundance of life with an abundance of death. Prior to the events in issues #40–43, the Surfer managed to kill Thanos—or so he believes. Later, starting with issues #44 and onwards, it turns out that Thanos has tricked the Surfer, and that he is in fact very much alive. None the less, the events unfolding in this storyline are a lesson that a representative of Death wants to teach his perceived opposite—the Surfer.

So what is this lesson? Against the background of the above analysis, it would seem that Thanos has devised his plot to entrap the Surfer on Dynamo City in order to show him what *real life* is: not something glorious and sacred to protect, but something arduous, thoroughly unfair and futile. From Thanos's perspective, the hardships that the Surfer goes through are the results of *imbalance* between life and death. There are just too many people (looking for a job, trying to "make it" etc.), and the rich can take advantage of the endless supply of poor workers. Seen in this way, Thanos lends a great deal of weight to the story. Through its structure, plot and core sequences, it can be perceived as exemplifying both the inhumane and privileged aloofness of the Surfer and the inhumanity of the lives of ordinary people.

Confirming the earlier results of Gabilliet, there is also something obviously messianic or angelic about this: a creature of godly power is sent to lead the life of an ordinary man and is sentenced to death by an unfair society. The mundane person Zeaklar is saved in his efforts to defend this creature. He is born again after having been executed. While the storyline doesn't bring justice to the guilty or to their victims, it ends with a promise than the Surfer will one day return. If there is any hope

to be found as an alternative to Thanos's lesson, it is that the injustices might be righted—somehow—without killing half of the world.

Emblematic Exemplum or Superhero Story?

The superhero genre as such is inherently emblematic in that its heroes and villains can be seen as representatives of ideas that are explored in the stories. For example, Superman could be described as an emblem for the ideal American. He has come to America from a distant world, been brought up on the countryside by an honest working couple and moved to the corrupt and crime-ridden Big City where tries to do the Good Thing. Superhero stories can also be seen as exempla, again and again emphasizing Stan Lee's "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility" (Amazing Fantasy, 1962, p. 11), in turn a paraphrase of Luke 12:48: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." However, there seems to be a bit more to these *Silver Surfer* issues in this regard than what can be said about any superhero story. In the analysis, both the dream sequence with its full-page composition that recapitulates the Surfer's background and the above lesson from Thanos could be read as exempla.

Similarly, the initial page where the Surfer stands in line, the depiction of Shalla Bal and the other loves next to death symbols and the page showing the Surfer standing before the Great I, could be regarded as emblems. In addition, the fall from space to Shanty Town was shown to have roots in a *catabasis* and in the Underworld *topos*, which both feature in medieval and renaissance works that are didactic and political. While this is clearly a superhero storyline, what happens when you read these issues as genre compositions rather than genre singulars?

The notion of genre composition is best presented by Alastair Fowler, building on Wittgenstein's ideas of family resemblances.[4] According to Fowler, genres aren't

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[4] For the later Wittgenstein, language existed as interrelated but separate practices, each producing its own set of rules. The practices were related not through having a set of qualities present in all of them, but through "family resemblances"—traits and qualities common to a family but not present in every member (1953, sec. 66). W. J. T. Mitchell compares these resemblances to strands in a rope: No single thread runs through the entire rope (1988, p. 363).

catalogues of literary works, but families of textual traits. A singular work commonly uses traits from several genres, which is why Fowler stresses the analytical uses of genres rather than the classificatory uses (2002, pp. 256–281).

In Larry Scanlon's *Narrative, Authority and Power* (1994), the medieval exemplum is characterized by its persuasive, ideological power, based on a pendulum movement between fiction and history, where the reader puts himself in the protagonist's situation and triumphs with him (pp. 31–35). Rather than just restating (religious) doctrine, the sermon exemplum *moved* its audience and made them relate the story's content to their own lives.

These characteristics are really spot on when it comes to the *Silver Surfer* issues. They explain why the connection between the story and the 1990 historical recession is so immediate and strong; they explain the strong ideological content; and they explain what the issues try to *do* with its audience. In identifying with the Surfer they are recognized in their own ordeals and hardships, vindicated in their feeling of having been treated unfairly, and ultimately freed, emotionally, through the Surfer's death punishment and its unexpected but triumphant (for the Surfer) result. This also harmonizes very well with the previous findings about the Silver Surfer gestalt and its messianic qualities.

Scanlon also deals with what he calls the "public exemplum," a contemporary counterpart to the sermon exemplum, similar but not identical to the classic exemplum. Scanlon gives this genre three central characteristics:

1. "… the public exemplum addresses issues of lay authority. It is classicizing and political …"
2. "… the public exemplum had a propensity toward the evil example, toward narratives which demonstrate the efficacy of their *sententiæ* by enacting violations of them."
3. "The source of authority which the public exemplum counterposes to history's inherent anarchy […] is the monarch" (p. 81).

Seen through this lens, the *Silver Surfer* issues not only offer a protagonist to identify and triumph with as per above, but also a demonstration of what happens to a ruler

and a society that lets bureaucrats take over and neglects the principles cited by the Surfer in his address to the Great I—i.e. listening to the people and seeing that they are treated fairly. Taken as a whole, the medieval exemplum genre has a lot of explanatory power in relation to the issues at hand, perhaps even more than the superhero genre.

Similarly, calling something "emblematic" is one thing, but reading something through the renaissance emblem genre is another. In addition to being graphical and representational, the emblem has structure. There is more than one way to describe this structure, but for the purpose of this analysis, it suffices to use the classic parts the *inscriptio* (a moral message or problem), the *pictura* (image) and the *subscriptio* (the elaboration on the *inscriptio* and *pictura*). Looking at the entry scene (#41, p. 1) that I previously called emblematic and iconotextual, it can now be seen as consisting of a *pictura* (the line of unemployed in front of skyscrapers), an *inscriptio* (the quoted dialogue about the Silver Surfer as a regular person) followed by a *subscriptio* (the rest of the storyline). Seen this way, the emblem is about what it means to be a regular person.

In her treatment of the emblem in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, Helena M. Ardholm (1999) uses Daniel Russell's discursive definition of the emblem and points out how typographic narrative passages can be seen to take the structural place of the *pictura*. She also references Beata Agrell's fusion of the emblem with formalist defamiliarization, where the discursive power of the emblem lies in its reassembly of familiar pieces, forming a new "interpretive structure" (Ardholm, 1999, pp. 27–39; Agrell, 1997, pp. 26–58). Both these approaches are interesting here. The entire sequence where the Surfer's dreams and history is displayed in front of the rich audience could—following Ardholm—be seen as a *pictura*, not through its graphical representation but through its structural position. The *incriptio* is the headline initiating the sequence: "Their Life Presents: The Life and Times of the Silver Surfer." And as the *pictura* encompasses the entire story of the Silver Surfer, the *subscriptio* in this structure becomes all previous issues up to the point where the Surfer ends up in Dynamo City. With Agrell (who uses Shklovsky's concept of defamilairization), you could say that the sequence rearranges the familiar Silver Surfer story so that the comic–comic

reader relationship may be reinterpreted. Seen this way, the emblem genre also provides a lot of detail and explanatory power to the observations in the analysis.

Conclusion

While originally an antique rhetorical figure, exempla in literature are brief stories that make moral points, chiefly by rewarding the just, punishing the guilty or presenting the truth about some state of affairs. The *Silver Surfer* issues #40–43 fall in the latter category. Contrary to *The Dark Knight Returns* (which rewards the just), the *Silver Surfer* issues seem to have no moral justice. There is no built-in therapeutic function other than the confirmation that society *is* unfair and, perhaps, the cathartic consolation of seeing the hero become just as powerless as an any regular person. Admittedly, the Surfer does triumph against the robots, but only once restored to his full power. As a "regular person," he never does.

The issues taken as a whole provide the reader with an emblematic exemplum, a text that helps them understand the world around them—specifically the 1990s Recession. As the previously quoted appreciative comment in issue #40 confirms, this is the primary need that the comics answer, and it is also similar to yet different to typical superhero comics. In these issues, the Surfer never truly triumphs, and the opposition isn't bested. Dynamo City remains, just as unjust as it was when the Surfer arrived. If there is some consolation to be found, it is in the cathartic recognition of the situation and in the superhero being as powerless as the reader. From a modern genre perspective, this underlines the frequently mentioned similarities between gods and superheroes, as it means that the superhero comic can function in a way very similar to the religious text, only in a secular age.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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