

Deconstructing the Superhero Genre: BDSM, Hypersexuality and Marshal Law

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In the dystopian world where the eponymous Marshal Law patrols the streets, American superheroes are remnants of a war they fought in a far-off place to serve their country; all genetically modified, some unable to cope with civilian life and a few mentally unstable. While Marshal Law, a former super-soldier himself, is hunting down the apparently criminal ones, there are also those who serve the public and have gained celebrity status, such as Public Spirit. When The Sleepman, a mysterious superhero-gone-bad, rapes and kills human lookalikes of Celeste, Public Spirit's girlfriend, the Marshall suspects the latter to be the culprit: Due to their genetic modifications, superheroes are hypersexual; their insatiable lust exceeds the capacity of normal humans. While Marshal Law is suppressing his hypersexuality by inflicting physical pain on himself, he suspects Public Spirit to sexually assault women and kill his victims afterwards.

In this paper I argue that the superhero comic Marshal Law (1987 – 2002) undercuts the genre-typical dominance of white male heteronormativity through uncontrollable hypersexuality, sadomasochism and fetishism. Neither the sexual predator The Sleepman nor the protagonist, wearing a black leather outfit, a full face mask as well as numerous piercings and inflicting pain onto himself with barbed wire wrapped around his arm, stay within the boundaries of accepted heterosexual practices. While The Sleepman does not suppress his hyper-libido, Marshal Law is obscures his identity as well as his sexual preferences and uses fetish outfits and masochistic practices to conceal and suppress his true (though modified) nature. Either way, being a superhero or -villain is synonymous with being sexually non-conformative, in the closet or outside. This take on the superhero genre deconstructs the image of the superhero typical for the Golden and Silver Age.

Kurzbiographie

My name is Thomas Scholz, I am a fourth year Ph.D. student in the Ph.D. Track for International Writers in the Comparative Literature program at Washington University in St. Louis, MO. Before coming to St. Louis, I worked as an editor and literary critic for German newspapers, including Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Die Welt. My main fields of interests are 20th and 21st century literature, transmedia storytelling, fantastic literature, young adult fiction, game studies and visual narratives.