Comic Books and Philosophy Research Paper

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Recently, Detective Comics (D.C.) made a popular, and potentially financially sound business decision, when they chose to bring back the shiny red briefs on the outside of Superman’s costume in Action Comics # 1000, 2018. This decision has many people wondering and debating as to the purpose of the red briefs within the comics as well as whether or not Superman should make better life and wardrobe decisions going forward. The move to bring back the briefs by D.C. comics has been a popular one and this essay will explore the reasons why this was the right move on the part of D.C. and why the briefs should stay for many years to come.

One reason why Superman (and other heroes) should continue to wear their briefs on the outside of the costumes is because the briefs tie the esthetics of the superhero (or superheroine) to the superhero persona in Western Culture of power, masculinity or femininity, and virility and, in so doing, keep front and center this iconography in the collective conscious for a society struggling toward gender equality . For example, by having color changes or divisions at the waist, groin, feet, hands and chest, certain attributes of the characters stand out leading to a symbolic association based on the body part emphasized. Author (and comic book writer) Grant Morrison explains the historical significance of the red briefs in his 2011 book *Supergods*:

Underpants on tights were signifiers of extra-masculine strength and endurance in 1938.

The cape, showman-like boots, belt and skintight spandex were all derived from circus

outfits and helped to emphasize the performative, even freak-show-esque, aspect of Superman’s adventures. (Morrison, 2011)

Right or wrong, and consciously or not, these features lead to hyper masculine or hyper feminine character traits while, at the same time, making the characters seem larger than life on such a simple format. (Williams, 2014) When Superman wears red underwear on the outside of his otherwise blue clothing, the reader’s eyes cannot help but be drawn to that specific area of his body, just as the red “S” on his chest draws our eyes to the potent symbol that the Ubermensch represents. (Nietztsche, 1883) By having the reader’s attention, albeit briefly, focused on Superman’s red underwear, Superman’s masculinity and virility as a representation of “true manhood” becomes impressed upon the reader. Just as a speeding red sports car flying down the highway is more likely to catch the attention of the patrolman and be pulled over and ticketed, so the red underwear, as well as the red “S” on Superman’s chest, catches the reader's attention, even when the reader is not overtly aware of it, and subtlety becomes a reinforcement of societies patriarchal ideas of masculinity, however toxic this masculinity might be. The reverse effect happens in the case of female heroines who wear their underwear on the outside of their costume. In the case of female heroes, their femininity and sexual objectification are reinforced to the reader. One might well wonder why, if the values reinforced by these icons are so antiquated and objectifying to both men and women alike, and help to propagate a patriarchal and hyper-masculine undesirable culture, why would the industry want to bring back these symbols and reinforce them in the eyes and minds of the readers. In fact, many argue against the return of Superman’s red briefs if, for no other reason, then they are aesthetically outdated and ugly. These opinions hold value, however they detract for the more important issue of transparency. Remove the briefs and you still have an art form that can be, simultaneously, entertaining and empowering, while still reinforcing negative stereotypes and masculine tropes, if only more subtly. By keeping the briefs on, comic books and comic book superheroes become irrevocably tied to their historical and social origins and, in so doing, keep the proverbial elephant in the room. That is to say, while one reads comics for entertainment and, even sometimes, empowerment, one can also be aware that the portrayal of gender and violence within their pages, can reinforce negative ideologies that, as a society, we hope to one day evolve away from. As George Santayana famously said, “those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.”

While the recent return of Superman’s briefs was a good move on the part of D.C. and helped, once again, bring comic books and comic book superheroes back into the public's’ collective imagination and, in turn, helped boost comic book sales, it also helps to remind us of the dangers of complacently digesting imagery and iconography that, left unchecked, will continue to contribute to a patriarchal society steeped in toxic masculinity. By allowing Superman to continue to wear his red briefs on the outside of this costume, readers everywhere can not only be reminded of the historically significant origins of such imagery, but also remain vigilant of the messages such imagery contains.

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**Key: (Highlight these items in your essay using the color code below.)**

Thesis

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