

The Punisher: A Cultural Image of the ‘Moral Wound’

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Abstract

The concept of “moral wound” has in recent years re-entered the scientific debate centered on war experiences of soldiers and veterans from predominantly Western societies, previously dominated by the category of PTSD. The discourse of “moral wounds” is rooted in the Indo-European cultural heritage, indicating that the traumatic potential of war experiences may be considered universal. This paper analyses the creation and potential social impact of the cultural image of “moral wound” in the contemporary U.S. popular culture through the content analysis of depictions of the character of the Punisher in the comic book medium and the eponymous Netflix TV series.

Keywords: *thémis*, moral wound, ethics of war, popular culture, Marvel Comics, Homer, vigilantism, war trauma, regeneration through violence

Introduction

The focus in the analysis of the emergence of war-related personality disorders among veterans has been recently shifting toward the notion of a “moral wound” (Sherman 2015, Meagher 2014, Wood 2016). “Moral wound,” or “moral injury” is a concept embedded within the broader medical discourse encompassing other combat trauma-related disorders like PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or TBI (traumatic brain injury). The notion of “moral injury” was introduced to the social sciences in mid-90s by Shay (Shay 1994, 2002) and, by the end of 2000s, revisited by Litz (Litz et al. 2009). The idea, however, is far from new: it lies at the foundations of European culture, having gained prominence as early as XI-VII BCE, in the Homeric epics and art. Through the cultural artifacts of ancient Greece, the ideas of violent heroism and its price, both physical and metaphysical, have permeated various cultures. They are clearly noticeable in modern art and pop-culture, but also vital in understanding the social sensibilities of contemporary societies, particularly American society. This article examines one notable emergence of the concept of a “moral wound” in present-day popular culture within the broad context of classical Homeric heritage and ethics of war: the Netflix TV series *Marvel’s The Punisher*. Part I of this work addresses the emergence of the notion of “moral wound,” analyzing two prominent cases of betrayal of “what’s right” in the myths of Achilles and Odysseus. Part II focuses on the social concepts of divine and human law, and their application in the idea of vigilantism. The subsequent section investigates the origins of the Punisher and other vigilantes within the broad context of American history. Finally, the Punisher’s reinforced image

as a morally wounded soldier and veteran in the Netflix TV series, analyzed from an anthropological perspective as a socio-cultural product of War on Terror and the ambivalent relations between the American society and its army, form respectively part IV and the conclusion of the article.

‘Moral wound’

The concept of a “moral wound” was introduced to modern anthropology by Moses Finley. His analysis of the world of Homer (1954, rev. 2002) emphasized the meaning of *thémis* as an ethical category *de facto* ruling the lives of ancient Greeks. *Thémis* means “what’s right”: it is a concept encompassing “custom, tradition, folk-ways, mores, whatever we may call it, the enormous power of ‘it is (or is not) done’” (Finley 2002, 82). Like the contemporary notion of “it is/it isn’t done” *thémis* in ancient Greece embodied what is nowadays defined as “moral order, convention, normative expectations, ethics, and commonly understood social values” (Shay 1994, 5). *Thémis* can be thus described as an axio-normative aspect of the phenomenological *Lebenswelt* (Schütz 1945, 1967).¹ Situated on the crossroads between two spheres: the sacred and the profane, this concept also served as the foundation of an impassable axio-normative barrier between the human and the other-than-human: either god-like or beast-like. Delineating the borders of humanity, it served as an all-encompassing ethical system, defining, among other things, the key values of an ancient society: honor, duty, loyalty, guest-right and gift-exchange. Moreover, it was also regarded as a measure of the Absolute, sanctified by long tradition and by its inherently sacral nature. For *Thémis* was first and foremost a Greek goddess, a Titaness born in time before Olympic gods, a personification of divine order, law, and custom. As the daughter of Uranos (Sky) and Gaia (Earth), and sister to entities such as Cronus (Time), Hyperion (Light) or Mnemosyne (Memory), *Thémis* personified the primary sense-infused order imposed on the chaotic world (Hesiod 1914, 135). *Thémis* then, both as a category denoting “what’s right” and thus demarcating the unassailable border of human community in a world inhabited also by gods and monsters, as well as a universally revered goddess of order and law, belongs to the sphere broadly associated with modern ethics and morality, but infused with a strong religious component: a presence of a higher sanction. The evidence from the socio-cultural artifacts of ancient Greeks indicates a persistent, deeply rooted belief that every instance of breaking the divine law, betraying “what’s right,” brings about tragic consequences for the perpetrators, their victims and their community as a whole. This belief forms an ethical foundation of such cultural phenomena as the myths of the Labdacids and the house of Atreus, as well as related archetypes, but most importantly—the premise of Homeric *Iliad*, an epic devoted to the depiction not so much of the Trojan War as of Achilles’ wrath.²

Achilles as an epitome of a morally wounded soldier

Achilles was the greatest hero among the Achaeans besieging Troy under the leadership of Agamemnon. Agamemnon, as the military leader of the host, had the right of the mightiest to divide the spoils of war as he saw fit. But by demanding the prize of

Achilles in recompense for his own loss he had violated *thémis*, the unwritten structure of sanctified mores and conventions binding the Achaeans tighter than any other social obligation. By taking Briseis, Agamemnon had broken the trust between his soldiers and himself as their leader. By putting his own interest above the well-being of those under his command, he nullified the basis for their mutual loyalty – his to his men and his men to himself. This betrayal of *thémis* affected Achilles the most, as its main victim but also as a personage of an elevated, heroic status among the Achaeans. As Finley writes, “Achilles’ ‘honour’ was openly shamed, and once ‘honour’ is destroyed the moral existence of the loser collapses” (Finley 2002, 117). However, the betrayal of “what’s right” by the Achaean leader also undermined the foundations of the whole Achaean community: for if such a thing could have happened to Achilles, one of the most powerful, heroic and honorable of them all, it could happen to anyone. The fundamental rules of social life, *thémis*, had been betrayed, and that violation led to other infringements on the axio-normative structure of the community, this time perpetrated by Achilles himself. Peleus’ son had been excluded from the community of *thémis* by Agamemnon’s deed, but he also excluded himself, intentionally alienating himself from his erstwhile companions. The greatest Achaean hero stopped fighting the Trojan War; and more: he had sent his mother to plead with Zeus against his own comrades. Throughout the bloody fighting he had stayed in his tent, passively observing the defeats and deaths of his brothers in arms, unmoved by their tragedy—because he had no longer perceived himself as a member of their community.

The betrayal of *thémis* engenders *mênis*—“an indignant wrath” (Shay 1994, 21), “a cosmic sanction, [...] a social force whose activation brings drastic consequences on the whole community” (Muellner 2004, 8). *Mênis* is more than just an individual’s anger at some perceived injustice; it is a rightful wrath, a devastating emotion that puts its bearer beyond the boundaries of *thémis*, beyond the limits of one’s community. *Mênis* is a wrath of gods—and of Achilles, when his *Lebenswelt*, and with it his assumptions of justice and fairness, were irrevocably broken. In this instant Achilles positioned himself beyond the community of men—and his status as the Other was illustrated by his final violation of *thémis*: the desecration of the body of Hector, Troy’s greatest hero. This deed pushed the Achaean champion beyond the limits of humanity, into the realm of gods and beasts. His madness, his *mênis*, turned him into an *inhuman*, devoid of human feelings or any respect to socially accepted values (Strauss Clay 1983, 66). As Apollo remarks to other Olympic gods,

So, then, you would all be on the side of mad Achilles, who knows neither right nor ruth? He is like some savage lion that in the pride of his great strength and daring springs upon men’s flocks and gorges on them. Even so has Achilles flung aside all pity, and all that conscience which at once so greatly banes yet greatly boons him that will heed it. (Homer, *Iliad* 24.31–35)

The only way Achilles could have come back from the state of *inhumanity* was by returning to the community of men and gods. Reentering the realm of *thémis* is, however, only the final step in a long process of rebuilding one’s identity as whole—and

human. It involves both acknowledging the general existence of the sphere of human emotions, ethics, social ties and obligations in any community, as well as accepting its individual, singular existence in oneself. In *Iliad* this process is illustrated by the sequence of Achilles' meetings with his mother Thetis and Hector's father, Priam. During the meeting with Thetis Achilles accepted a direct order from Zeus to return the body of Hector to the Trojans, but what truly allowed him to reenter the realm of *thémis* in both its ethical, axio-normative aspect and as the sphere of intersubjective, communal life, was his shared mourning with the king of Troy. Only in the meeting with Priam did Achilles acknowledge not merely his grief and longing, but also his guilt, his own betrayal of *thémis*—and solely through the process of communal grieving and reparation could the Achaean hero have regained his former place and status within the community (Finley 2002, 118).

Odysseus as an epitome of a morally wounded veteran

Homer's *Iliad* illustrates a particular kind of betrayal of *thémis* and its consequences, which occurs within the "primary group" (Shils & Janowitz 1948): the community of shared, identity-defining experience of like-minded individuals. Such a brotherhood, akin to the notion of *Umwelt* grounded within the social phenomenological framework, constitutes the most intimate part of *Lebenswelt* (Schütz 1967), consisting of intense, face-to-face relations between "consociates" (Ritzer & Stepnisky 2018). However, there is also a second type of betrayal of "what's right," pertaining to the wider community of the primary socialization, and concerning the social and cultural structures considered by an individual as the ultimate, unquestionable reality: *Lebenswelt*.

Odyssey in its depiction of a decade-long homecoming of a war veteran showcases the second form of violation of "what's right." Whereas Achilles had been wronged by his military leader, and the *thémis* betrayed was the *thémis* of a war-band, a brotherhood of warriors, Odysseus faced a different kind of betrayal at the end of his journey: a destruction of *thémis* in the community he perceived as "normal" and "real", as opposed to the singular, temporary situation of war. It had been the society he had belonged to – and was coming back to—that broke the unwritten, sanctified moral code of conduct. Odysseus was a lawful ruler of the island Ithaca. His twenty years-long absence created a power vacuum on Ithaca in which ensued a bitter struggle between noble houses, epitomized in the famous rivalry for the hand of Odysseus' wife. Penelope's suitors violated *thémis* on multiple occasions: from a blatant disregard for the lawful claim to power of Telemachus, Odysseus' son, through an attempt on his life, implicitly confirming their awareness of his status, to the most prolonged breach of *thémis*, which took the form of a war of attrition on Odysseus' *oikos* (household). The suitors severely abused their guest rights by forcefully overstaying their welcome, raping several of Penelope's servant women, and threatening to bankrupt the whole household. The ultimate betrayal, however, came in the form of breaking the sacred guest-law: the suitors' cruel treatment of Odysseus when he reappeared in his house in the disguise of a beggar.

Odysseus survived twenty long years of traumatic experiences and a multitude of encounters with dangerous, strange, monstrous and god-like beings. He finally broke down in his own house, upon witnessing the violation of *thémis* of his foundational reality. The cosmic injustice of the situation, in which the dreamed-of, safe haven of home became just another battlefield, further aggravated by the very real threat to Odysseus' own life and the lives of his loved ones, undoubtedly reawakened his traumatic memories from Troy. Thus, unsurprisingly, Odysseus dealt with the final threat to his *oikos* not in his capacity as a peaceful ruler of a prosperous island, but as a soldier in a ruthless, bloody war. And although Odysseus exploded with calculated, terrible violence, mercilessly butchering the sons of noble families gathered in his house, his deed was ultimately considered heroic, openly sanctioned and aided by Athena, and regarded as lawful by the community—exactly because he reasserted the moral right which has been broken. His actions were deemed rightful not only by gods, represented in *Odyssey* by the goddess of wisdom and war strategy, but also by the Ithacan society. Such judgment, both divine and profane, is best explained through the concept of *thémis*: because Penelope's suitors had betrayed *thémis*, their death became a rightful retribution, an act of cosmic justice.

Human and divine law

The human edicts usually followed very closely the “divinely sanctioned order whose observance is of the essence of justice” (Vlastos 1996, 98). *Thémis* was sacred law, sanctioned by the gods, and thus by necessity observed and enforced by human societies. That social control, amorphous at first, yet in time having evolved into the complex system of formal legal rules, social norms and informal sanctions characteristic of classical Athens (Lanni 2009), was acutely felt by all who disobeyed the law. The exile from one's community and the sundering of all communal bonds constituted, along with the death penalty, the ultimate punishment meted out by the community to an individual—as evidenced by the famous Socrates' case (Ober 2006). But the social sanction, in all its harshness and inevitability, was presented only as a profane translation of the sacred edicts of gods. The classical Greek texts are very clear: on the occasions when human actions went against *thémis* they invariably brought on all involved the wrath of gods, ill fate and misery. Those humans who failed in their duty toward *thémis* (and *Thémis*) were persecuted by Dike, the goddess of justice and one of the Horae, the three daughters of *Thémis* and Zeus (Aeschylus 1926), as well as by the Erinyes, primordial goddesses of vengeance and retribution (Smith 1873). The Theban mythos recounting the fate of Labdacus and his descendants is an evocative example of the ancient Greeks' belief in the superiority and inevitability of *thémis*. *Thémis* as a form of an ultimate order, comprising fundamental laws and morality, is sacred. As such it takes precedence over the imperfect human laws, which are *de facto* only flawed renditions of its contents, and the act of its betrayal leads to the removal of the perpetrator—and his victims—from the circle of humanity. The violation of *thémis* can be repented and repaired, but only at an extremely high cost. Tragedies such as Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, or Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*, which

illustrate this deeply ingrained conviction, for centuries remained a vital source of the European and European-influenced cultural traditions.

The evidence of the strength of this belief may be found even today in the concept of the spirit of the law (Garcia, Chen & Gordon 2014). The dichotomy of the spirit of the law as the perceived intention of law versus the letter of the law as its literal meaning is deeply rooted in the broadly defined Western cultures, and its origins can be traced not only to the Greek mythology and philosophy as well as the Judeo-Christian religious traditions, but also to other Indo-European mythologies and folklore. The perceived superiority and higher moral value of the spirit of the law against its letter is also, curiously, the underlying foundation of the concept of a vigilante. Since antiquity the ultimate power of “what’s right” had been juxtaposed with the flawed human laws and their fallible interpretations, bringing forth a whole slew of vigilantes: from Antigone or Robin Hood to Batman, Captain America, or Dirty Harry. Vigilantism as “law enforcement undertaken without legal authority by a self-appointed group of people” (Oxford Dictionary 2017) remains one of the prevalent themes in contemporary culture.

Vigilantes as self-appointed defenders... of *thémis*

A vigilante operates in a particular area of confluence between violence, justice and vengeance. The idea of a lone avenger of law has fallen on a particularly fertile ground in American culture, spread, according to Richard Slotkin (1998a, 1998b, 2000), between two exceptionally significant and influential narratives: the myth of captivity and the concept of regeneration through violence. The captivity narrative, structured around the historical incidents of Indian attacks on colonial settlements, kidnappings and individuals’ acculturation to different ways of life, emerged as an unlikely result of the clash between the harsh reality of life on a dangerous frontier of conflicting cultures and peoples and the Puritan religious ideas of earthly trial and rescue by the God’s grace. The myth “reduced a complex of religious beliefs, philosophical concepts, and historical experiences to a single, compelling, symbolic ritual-drama” (Slotkin 2000, 101) and has been transformed throughout the years into a potent symbol of victimization, sacrifice and redemption. The concept of regeneration through violence, originated in roughly the same time but rooted in the experience of “savage war,” depicted a conviction that successful resolution could only be brought about through the total destruction of the enemy. The myth of regeneration through violence views any cultural and axio-normative differences between the antagonists as inconsolable—and therefore, soluble only through eradication. One of the crucial aspects of this myth is the exigency of confirming one’s power through its unlimited exercise. Consequently, the themes of Messianic acceptance or even willingness for passive sacrifice and the avenging, unforgiving spirit of crusades can be found—alternately, or simultaneously—in the majority of artifacts of American culture, significantly influencing the social discourse and political decisions. The long-existing American figure of speech, “destroy in order to save” (Carter 2018) allows us a glimpse into the inherently dialectical roots of this foundational mythology. It’s duality, however, can be resolved through

the analytic application of the category of *thémis*. *Thémis*, defined as both sacred law and its everyday incarnation of "what's right," here must be viewed not only as a set of abstract ideas, but also an increasingly real, tangible, space- and time-bound phenomenon. For *thémis* delineates the boundaries of the human community: within them it creates and preserves a safe haven of shared, intersubjective reality. Beyond its limits, wilderness rules: a lawless, savage space where everything is possible and where the only law is the one kept – or not – within oneself. This inner recognition of and adherence to *thémis* constitutes the sole, fragile link with one's community and culture in the wilderness beyond the physical boundaries of "what's right." Moreover, it forms the foundation, the very center of one's perceived self in the wild initially conceived of as bereft of social structures, institutions and norms. That peculiar space of beyond, existing simultaneously as a physical and axio-normative phenomenon, earned in the American mythology its own name: Indian Country.

The uniqueness of the situation of the early American settlers did not lie in the fact that the wilderness they encountered beyond the boundaries of their own communities was inhabited; inter-group relations had been, after all, a constant element of every human civilization. The peculiarity of the American situation is encapsulated in the ambivalence of their relation with the encountered Other. The Indian tribes seemed to the Puritan settlers at once completely alien and threatening as representatives of a separate, fully formed society exhibiting different culture, language, social structure and axio-normative system, and yet frustratingly similar in their generalized humanity that their way of life, their culture and beliefs formed a challenge—and in some cases even significant competition—to the formerly unquestioned *Lebenswelt* of the colonists. The meetings with the Other, nearly continuous and considerably varied in their socio-environmental dynamics, had arguably exacerbated the myth-derived responses of the early Puritan settlers. Thus Indian Country became a place of testing, both in the Messianic narrative of captivity, which formed a highly symbolic pattern of passive resistance to cultural conflict, with its inherent resolution in the form of miraculous deliverance after the endurance of trials,³ and in the myth of regeneration through violence, which in essence constitutes an incarnation of the ancient concept of eternal return, replayed, however, in the decorations of "savage war." Due to the fact that both the passive Messianism and the exceedingly aggressive myth of violent redemption can be viewed as highly individualized responses of early American society to outside threats to *thémis*, their evolution is conjoint. Thus, the waning of the former in the rapidly changing American society of the twentieth and twenty-first century, partly in response to the increasingly expansionist American worldview (Schlesinger 1977), and in part due to evolution of the forms of popular religious symbols and experiences, was accompanied by the largely unrestrained growth of the latter. Indian Country, immortalized in the early American myths as the place of testing, soon became an object of twin desires: to pitch oneself against the alluring and hostile power of physical and moral wilderness—and to emerge victorious, as the avenger of inculcated values and norms in the face of constant temptation. Final victory over Indian Country equated with its destruction, the dominance of civilization realized

both as a literal understanding of the Biblical commandment to subdue the earth and hold dominion over it, and as an iteration of the prevalent Indo-European myth of eternal return through destruction to sinless beginnings (Eliade 1959). The irrefutable, continuous virility of the powerful symbol of Indian Country as a hostile, challenging place/presence can be seen in many American conquests to date—from the original conflicts rooted in the colonial expansion of the eighteenth century, through the Vietnam War, to War on Terror (Hasford 1979, 129; Herr 1991, 255; West 2012, 4).

In the universal narrative structures of myth one of two fates awaits the lone figure facing trial in the place of testing: he can either become the hero, thus confirming the supremacy of his community's *thémis*—his exploits and trials retold in myths and stories, further reaffirming the sacred nature of the community's laws and rules—or, if he fails, he will become something else altogether: the villain, the evil twin, the hero's axio-normative opposite, whose fate serves as a warning, paradoxically further fulfilling the same social function of asserting and upholding the existing social norms. The unflinching avowal of values in the face of dire antagonism is the mark of all heroic figures of the American mythology: from the lone hunter, through the equally lone ranger, a Wild West sheriff, a private detective of dark, industrial cities teeming with vice and temptation, to the modern superhero. Thus the figure of a vigilante, harkening back to the reimagined reality of the Frontier as a "mythic space" and time of origins of a new nation (Slotkin 1998b, 61) and construed as a worthy successor to the self-sufficient and self-contained mythical figures of old, can be viewed as an indispensable element of the modern American identity. The key component of the concept of vigilante is his natural affinity with the spirit of the law defined as the ideal form of *thémis*; his understanding and dedication to the upholding of the abstract, divine law stands in stark contrast with the usual imperfect interpretation and implementation of law by the communities in need of his help. And yet the allure of the character of a lone hero is manifold, embedded simultaneously in the universal and particular aspects of individual consciousness as well as cultural identity—and hence, nearly irresistible as an incarnation of both oldest myths and modern longings. He is the mythical hero on a quest: an embodiment of human ability to act in the face of adversity; yet at the same time—from the perspective of the communities in which he acts—he is the Other, forever remaining beyond community's ken, but always bound just as its members by the common, all-encompassing *thémis*. It is in this light that the vigilante's apparent alienation and loneliness should be analyzed: as a willing tool of the sacred retribution, a human personification of Erinyes, a vigilante is required to remain beyond the borders of any community. His appearance and actions are a consequence of the violation of *thémis* and while the retribution enacted by him might restore balance to the afflicted community, the mantle of the avenger of justice prevents him as an individual from ever acquiring peace. Tantalizingly, he becomes at once the avenger of *thémis* and the scapegoat, in the meaning proposed and brilliantly elucidated by René Girard (1986). As the internal strife of a community can be solved through the ritual of sacrifice, thus breaking the cyclical nature of collective violence, the vigilante, already marked as Other, willingly becomes the sacrificial victim.

While the phenomenon of a vigilante is especially notable in the modern American culture, prompting some scholars to claim that it forms the basis for a particular type of monomyth (Jewett & Lawrence 1977, 2002), it nevertheless isn't singular to it. According to René Girard (2013), the specific convergence of violence, justice and vengeance inherent in the concept of a vigilante characterizes all human societies. Girard defines vengeance as "an interminable, infinitely repetitive process"—and indeed, blood feuds or gang wars can last decades, decimating whole populations and communities, as in e.g. Albania's case (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2015). From such a perspective, a vigilante, operating alone and usually masking their true identity, becomes the final instance of justice, the end stage of the vengeance circle: there is simply nobody else on whom the retaliation can be enacted. The fantasy of final punishment, of revenge without further retribution, fuels the vigilante myth all the more for its unattainability. For as Girard argues, modern societies chose a different path of ending the vicious circle of revenge: for the sake of social self-preservation, private vengeance as a retaliation for a prior crime has been substituted by a judicial system which limits the vicious circle of violence "to a single act of reprisal enacted by a sovereign authority specializing in this particular function" (Girard 2013, 16–17). And yet, the desire for revenge seems to remain a universally human experience, entrenched in modern conflicts from Kosovo, through Israel and Palestine, to South Africa (Summerfield 2002). Furthermore, the judiciary system—as any other social construct—can fulfill its functions and obligations only when social actors put enough faith in it (Berger & Luckmann 1966).

The Punisher and the betrayal of 'what's right'

The Punisher is a fictional anti-hero created in the 1970s (Conway, Romita Sr., Andru et. al 1974). The character was first introduced in the comics as a troubled foil to the "good guys", such as Spider-Man, but has since appeared in many comic book series owned by Marvel Comics and soon became one of the key characters in Marvel's ensemble of superheroes. In the mid-80's, after the end of the Vietnam War era, the anti-hero became the protagonist of his own comic series which perfectly mirrored the social mood of that time: it was pessimistic, brutal and dark, and offered no recourse to the power of law, which in itself was portrayed as corrupted and flawed. Contrary to the majority of the other Marvel titles, which kept a lighter profile suitable for younger readers, the subsequent installments of *The Punisher* presented various forms of graphic violence as the only means of achieving justice. The series since then consistently presented a cynical view of human nature as something inherently imperfect and susceptible to evil. In such a morally deficient world, only a chosen few are still able to comprehend the difference between right and wrong and act upon this understanding. In the anti-relativistic view, historically prevalent in American society, of reality as a phenomenon essentially accountable to unambiguous moral judgment, the foundations of which are intersubjectively shared within the community in the form of sacred law, *thémis*, the ultimate judgment rests with an individual. This concept arguably pervades the texts and various subsequent interpretations of the main

legal documents of the United States: the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Rooted in the religious beliefs of Puritan colonists and combined with the significant traditions of civic militias, distrust of institutions, strong emphasis on the value of the individual versus the communal, and the continuously resonant symbolism of the frontier (Turner 1893), the notion produced a remarkably fertile ground for the violent fantasy of vigilantism. This early development had been further buttressed by the industrializing meanders of American history, slowly taking the society's awareness away from the disappearing, gradually civilized Indian Country, toward wilderness inherent in the increasingly urbanized American territory; as Slotkin states, "The crucial sources of modern American social violence are found, not in the "exceptional" environment of the Frontier, but in "the peculiar conditions" of life in the American "metropolis"—the settled core of American society in which most Americans, then and now, have lived. Although the "frontier experience" is not a *cause* of American metropolitan violence, the elaboration and use of a Myth of the Frontier is one *effect* of the culture's attempts to explain and control the various forms of violence which originate in the social conditions of the metropolis" (Slotkin 1998b, 558). It should come as no surprise, then, that the most popular characters of vigilantes from main comic book power-houses, Marvel and DC, from Captain America and Batman to Spider-Man, Daredevil or Superman, molded after heroic figures of American mythical past, inhabit a hyper-realistic phantasm of urban wilderness. All of them seem to perfectly fulfill the social longing for a simpler world without cutting moral dilemmas, grey areas or lesser evils. However, even among them the character of the Punisher is singular.⁴ The difference between him and other modern superheroes can be essentially reduced to two distinctive traits: 1) moral rigidity resulting in incapability to compromise—and, at the same time, in lack of moral qualms in enforcing his vision of justice by all means necessary, including murder, torture and kidnapping, which manifests in visibly increased levels of graphic brutality, 2) alienation, both physical and metaphorical.

The character of Punisher can be considered an extreme stage of development of the vigilante concept. Punisher operates on his own. He is the judge, jury and executioner for all those who by his measure breached the spirit of law. Devoid of empathy and forgiveness, remaining outside any community or social structure, and relentlessly pursuing any betrayal of law, Punisher doesn't allow room for improvement nor a second chance. In his *modus operandi* he closely resembles one of the ancient Furies, or Erinyes. His alienation is both a result of his tragic past and an intentionally chosen way of life. The Punisher is an alter ego of Frank Castle, a highly decorated war veteran, skilled marksman and an exceedingly trained elite soldier. The comic storyline grounded his character in the Vietnam war era;⁵ the war itself, seen mostly through others' eyes, is depicted as an Achillean betrayal of *thémis*, in which soldiers dutifully obeyed their orders, fulfilling their part of the compact between the leaders and the led, at the same time realizing that the orders themselves were morally wrong and their commanders inept, uncaring and cowardly (Ennis & Robertson 2003). This betrayal of "what's right" has been compounded by an Odyssean violation of *thémis*, which happened upon Castle's homecoming. A carefree picnic in the Central Park of

the Castle's family turned into a slaughter when Frank's wife and children were killed by a mob for witnessing the murder of a police informant (Conway & DeZuniga 1975). The loss of his family, which during the war had been the only fixed point of Frank's existence, engendered in him a vicious psychological circle of desperation, alienation and trauma—and vengeance. It was the second defining moment for the emerging persona of the Punisher, when Castle understood that his idealistic vision of the USA as a near-Utopia, a free country living up to its proclaimed values, was false. The loss of innocence and the feeling of betrayal Frank had experienced in Vietnam had been drastically aggravated by the realization that the cultural and social contents of his foundational reality were broken. While Castle fought in the jungles of Vietnam, the society he belonged to and fought for rejected the very values that had sent him abroad. In Castle's eyes, America became a promised land of criminals, thieves and murderers, where justice and law were only empty words, forming a façade of order underneath which grew corruption, plutocracy, and crime (Conway & DeZuniga 1975).

While it may be tempting to see the character of Punisher through the lens of Campbell's concept of monomyth (Campbell 2004), or the subsequent reworking of his ideas by Jewett and Lawrence (1977, 2002), I contend that the Punisher's emergence and subsequent "life" in popular culture can be more thoroughly comprehended through the application of Mircea Eliade's concept of myth as a narrative of 'sacred history' (Eliade 1963).⁶ Eliade's assertion that "[b]ecause myth relates the *gesta* of Supernatural Beings and the manifestation of their sacred powers, it becomes the exemplary model for all significant human activities" (Eliade 1963, 6) can be directly applied to the concept of *thémis* as a simultaneously ethical and religious category, and the consequences of its violation.⁷ The Punisher undeniably constitutes a modern—or even post-modern, deliberately patchwork at times—incarnation of a mythical protagonist, the lone hero: a faithful novice tested and tried by the wilderness, a ruthless avenger of violated *thémis*, finally: an ambiguous Other simultaneously alienating himself from and, as the scapegoat, ultimately shunned by the very community he embarks on a quest to help. Yet while the simplified trappings of 'a hero with a thousand faces' on a ritual journey are all there, an attempt to fit the Punisher into the monomythic mold would result only in obfuscation: for the crux of the problem does not lay with the hero himself, but with *thémis* he protects. In other words, the character of the Punisher should be viewed here as an archetype in the meaning proposed by Eliade: a paradigmatic model "for all the responsible activities in which men engage" (Eliade 1959, viii), in this particular case—a personified response to the perceived outside threat to the shared notion of "what's right."

The Punisher, contrary to the majority of the other masked vigilantes, does not hide his civil personality inasmuch as overwrites it, allowing the image of personified vengeance to become his main—or even only—identity. His self-appointed role of a ruthless guardian of the spirit of the law is expressed in his costume: black Kevlar suit with an image of a big white skull covering most of the front (Conway et al. 1974). The white skull serves as a symbol of death to the wrongdoers, a reminder of the ancient

idea of *memento mori*, but at the same time it signifies the Punisher himself as one “marked by death,” transgressing the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. In many storylines he is portrayed as more a force of nature than a real person, thus emphasizing his status of an outsider to the broad circle of the human community and embodying the abstract character of depersonalized, sacred retribution (Ennis & Corben 2004; Rucka & Checchetto 2011). This depersonalization indicates both the fact that the Punisher serves as a vehicle for the transmission of certain views and values, firmly ensconced within American culture, as well as the nature of this character as a *de facto* social construct, a merging of a slew of personal histories, real and imagined, into a modern symbol of a morally wounded veteran—and a source of social guilt. Yet first and foremost, he is an incarnation of the Erinyes—a modern, mythicised response to the violation of *thémis*. The acts of betrayal of “what’s right” and their brutal consequences both in the realm of war and in the world of everyday life arguably remain the dominant themes of *The Punisher* comics and TV series—together with what Gray called in Biblical terms the “lust of eye,” the delight in seeing and perpetrating violence (Gray 1998).

Ambivalent relations between the American society and its Army

The character of the Punisher emphasizes the ambivalence characterizing the American society’s relation with war in general and its veterans in particular. As Bacevich claims, “Today as never before in their history Americans are enthralled with military power,” and due to that fact “the global military supremacy [...] became central to our national identity” (Bacevich 2005, 1). The United States announced the beginning of the global War on Terror in 2001 and remains engaged in various military conflicts associated with the purposefully vague term to this day. War, a phenomenon which for the better part of the U.S. history had been viewed by the American society and its political leaders as an emergency, a short-lived test of endurance of the nation’s values, from the second half of the twentieth century became the new norm, or even, as Schlesinger Jr. claims, a confirmation of the long-foretold American destiny rooted in the religious, Calvinist outlook (Schlesinger 1977). On one hand, patriotism expressed in the form of active duty is still considered prestigious and laudable, an approved way to improve one’s status and to achieve a measure of social respect (Finley E. 2011). Military power and ideals, embodied in the image of a U.S. soldier, translated into a measure of the country’s strength and prosperity as well as the confirmation of its special status in the world. U.S. soldiers became the symbol of American military presence and actions around the globe, both in the eyes of the American society and the international public opinion. On the other hand, however, the United States maintains an even longer tradition of limited trust toward military forces (Royster 1996; Balko 2013), originated by the Founding Fathers and most memorably encapsulated by Elbridge Gerry, the fifth US vice-president, who called a standing army “the bane of liberty” (Kurland & Lerner 2000).

According to Schlesinger Jr., the change in the social attitude and the turn toward militarism can be traced back as far as Blackburn’s “imperialism of righteousness”

(1898), and through the “messianic demagoguery” of the first half of the twentieth century to the Vietnam War and its far-reaching consequences (Schlesinger 1977). However, it wasn’t until the Vietnam War, the social image of which effectively destroyed the good standing and authority of American military, when the American society started not only to heroize its veterans as a vivid symbol of its ambition, ideals, and accomplishments, but also to vilify them (Bacevich 2005; Shay 2002; Berinsky 2001). Incidents such as My Lai massacre or torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib indisputably and deeply aggravated the moral standing of American soldiers—as individuals and as a specific social group—in the eyes of both the U.S. society and the international public opinion (Shipler 2015; Drash 2009), yet they failed to engender a deeper, systemic reflection on the role of the military institutions within the American state. However, far more consequential had been the rift between military and civil society which appeared as a result of the process of professionalization of the army (Bacevich 2008; Finley E. 2011; Sherman 2015). The veterans of the War on Terror have been hailed and welcomed as heroes upon coming home, but when the greeting ends they very often end up feeling abandoned, not only by the institutions designed to take care of them, but also by the society itself (Gruszczuk 2017; Finley E. 2011; Shay 2002; Sherman 2015). The professionalization of the army coupled with the enduring tradition of symbolic and structural separation of the military within the society might have influenced the increasingly popular collective assumption that modern-day war veterans, having freely chosen their profession and concluded extensive practical training, should have been prepared for whatever war brought them. The risk is calculated into the pay—or so it would seem to the civilian part of the society (Dyer 2005; Bacevich 2008). Uniformed soldiers are often perceived as a personified symbol of the state’s right and might; the uniform lends them both anonymity and authority. Yet, it also brings them—as a visibly discernible group, and as individual members of the group—under close social scrutiny in the event of failure, misconduct, or crime. This ambivalent treatment of soldiers and veterans as both heroes and villains, tormentors and victims, finds its reflection in almost every aspect of the American culture and as such forms an apt representation of the broader issue of Americans’ simultaneous deep fascination and repulsion by violence. The character of the Punisher is a peculiar embodiment of American collective fears and longings, a merger of a slew of horrifying real and imagined individual experiences, at once a violent dream of power inherent in mythical justice and a warning of the true costs of war.

The Punisher as a morally wounded soldier and veteran

This socially reinforced image of a morally injured—as well as morally ambivalent—veteran is especially vivid in the 2017-2019 Netflix TV series, *Marvel’s The Punisher* (Lightfoot 2017, 2019). The newest on-screen incarnation of Frank Castle debuted in the season 2 of *Marvel’s Daredevil* (Petrie & Ramirez 2016), followed subsequently by a separate TV series dedicated solely to the titular antihero. The vision of the Punisher proposed by Netflix, a private entertainment company specializing in online streaming and content-production, requires a detailed analysis as a pop-culture image creat-

ed for a wide, fairly young, well-educated and multicultural audience (Sweney 2017; Dunn 2017). The critical reception of the series had been mixed but predominantly favorable,⁸ while the audience response was overwhelmingly positive, both in the assessment of its entertainment value and of its thoughtful depiction of US veterans and the troubles they face upon their return (Betancourt 2017; Dibdin 2017). The series' first season met with interest and approval of the veterans, many of whom have been included in the production both as members of the cast and as consultants (Illing 2017; Damore 2019), and garnered prevalently positive responses from the veterans among the audience (Riesman 2017; reddit 2017-2019). Frank Castle in the Netflix series is a veteran of War on Terror, coming home to New York after years of fighting in the desert hell of Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a crucial change: the Vietnam War, a conflict which undoubtedly deeply influenced the social identity and memory of the American society, here has been substituted with or by the current War on Terror. The full consequences of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have not yet been determined and won't be known for a while longer (Costs of War, 2011-2019; Crawford 2018). Yet it is obvious that the impact of this war on American society in all aspects, symbolic and cultural, psychological as well as economic and political, had already been profound (Gruszczyk 2017).

Castle's conscience is burdened with the awareness of having committed war crimes on the orders of his leaders and commanders; the commands to torture and kill an innocent prisoner were explained as "lesser evil" and justified as a necessary measure in what was depicted as a brutal conflict of values, but Castle had been well aware of their moral bankruptcy. The moral wounds from doing the wrong thing while doing the right thing—obeying orders from his supervisors—put a strain on Castle's self-awareness and broke his self-image as a decent person. According to Shepherd, moral wounds can be explained through the concept of split loyalties: "of having to make the impossible decision of betraying one ideal for another" (Shepherd 2017). Castle's decision to follow commands he knew to be morally wrong can be seen in this light as a moment of splitting loyalties: being a good soldier, remaining enclosed in the tight comradeship of his second family—his brothers in arms—essentially meant betraying the values and ideas of his original, foundational *Lebenswelt*. It contradicted everything he believed himself to uphold and, in effect, fractured his identity, his image of the self. This same moment, however, can be also seen as a betrayal of *thémis* perpetrated by Castle's superiors: their demands of his obedience in executing immoral orders constituted a betrayal of the unspoken yet incredibly powerful social sanction of "what's right". The wrath it engenders, the feeling of powerful, all-encompassing anger resulting from a deep violation of the common notion of justice and fairness, is mixed with an equally strong emotion: guilt.

Thus the first moral wound of Frank Castle stems from two sources: the first one internal, rooted in the fact of having been forced to make an impossible choice between one allegiance over another, and the second one external, emanating from the act of betrayal of the communally upheld notion of "what's right" by the authority figures. As such, it becomes an Achillean violation of *thémis*, a sundering of the social

identity constructed and assumed within the military "primary group." In a reaction similar to Achilles', Castle cuts the ties with his erstwhile comrades as soon as he heads back home, unwilling to make any contact with them—with the singular exception of Curtis Hoyle: a US Navy Hospital Corpsman, a group therapist for veterans, Castle's friend and ultimately a source of his guilt, for Frank holds himself responsible for Hoyle's impairment.

Castle comes back to his homeland a fractured, conflicted man, convinced of his own evil and inadequacy in the time of trial. But the moment of his breakdown doesn't happen until his family is killed in what seems an eruption of a gang war during a Sunday picnic in the Central Park. At that moment Castle experiences a second moral wound originating in the broader, Odyssean betrayal of *thémis*—the breaking of the social compact pertaining to the most fundamental values of individual and communal life within the sphere of his primary socialization. The assumption of safety and predictability of the world of everyday life, the notion of individual sacrifice willingly exchanged for the insurance of that safety for important others in an essentially moral pact between the soldier and his society—are broken. The murder of his whole family completely alienates Castle from the society: all his social ties within the *Lebenswelt*, fulfilling the needs of love and belonging (Maslow 1954), are severed in one traumatic, inexplicable event which sends the antihero beyond the accepted borders of the society and its institutions. Castle doesn't want to form any ties with the people who by his reckoning had breached his trust and broken the unwritten compact; he intentionally chooses alienation as a result of the ultimate betrayal of the notion of "what's right". The *thémis* undone in the act of the Castle family's murder had laid at the foundations of his primary identity and had formed his fundamental worldview, influencing every decision and judgment he made. Faced with the destruction of the basic tenets of his self, Castle erupts in anger and violence, all the more brutal for the underlying guilt he feels from the earlier, Achillean in nature, betrayal of *thémis*.

As the Odyssean violation of *thémis* ultimately destroys the notion of a moral or physical community, it also engenders rightful fury and a thirst for retribution. Castle, traumatized by his experiences, perceives his society as indolent, corrupt and rotten: a spiritual and material wilderness ruled by the strong, greedy and ruthless, bereft of justice and the spirit of the law. Moreover, he sees it as a place of war, governed by the rules of war: an unforgiving Indian Country, seductive, corrosive and utterly destructive, thus necessitating its own annihilation. In this, he is not far from Odysseus, who, when faced with the threat of rebellious suitors, applied the rules of violence and vengeance from the Trojan war to his home soil. Just like Odysseus, who at his home, far removed from realities of war, exploded in a fit of bloody frenzy, Frank Castle in New York decides to wage an all-out war against those whom he perceives as the traitors of *thémis*. And just as Odysseus, dressing himself as a beggar, a figure of Other in the culture of ancient Greece (Finley 2002), for his final act of heroism, Castle dons the uniform of Punisher—vengeance corporeal and incorporated, a vindictive spirit seen only in a moment of bloody and violent death – and begins what he considers a quest for justice. His actions can be justifiably called suicidal; not only because Castle

as the Punisher plans to single-handedly eliminate all of the New York gangs, but also because the need to exact vengeance and complete what he views as his mission is the only thing keeping him alive. Chris Hedges, a long-time war correspondent, calls the self-destructing drive of soldiers and veterans *ekpyrosis*, once more reaching into the cultural heritage of ancient Greece. *Ekpyrosis*, a great conflagration consuming the world so that it can be recreated in a pure, unadulterated state, seems to him a perfect metaphor of the soldiers' flirtation with war viewed as a lethal addiction (Hedges 2003). The concept of *ekpyrosis* constitutes only one of many culturally varying iterations of the universal myth of the eternal return, founded, according to Eliade, upon the "lunar perspective" of the continuous cycle of death and rebirth (Eliade 1959, 88): total destruction of life through return to primordial, amorphous, undifferentiated chaos is perceived as an indispensable prelude to its subsequent renewal and reinvigoration. Through that violent, inevitable self-sacrifice, the world can begin anew, sinless and faultless, in the state of primeval perfection. The uncanny power of this cosmogonic myth can be detected even in modern cultures, governed predominantly by the linear, and not cyclical concept of time: it clearly underlies the pervading theme of American culture—"regeneration through violence." In this view, destruction becomes the ultimate goal, for only annihilation is capable of bringing forth renewal and redemption. This attitude can be easily ascribed to the character of the Punisher, who doesn't plan—nor does he imagine—his life past the point of fulfilling his self-appointed mission. He believes that his gloriously violent sacrifice, his personal *ekpyrosis* is fated to bring a measure of edification to the world; thus the Punisher, both in the comic books and in the TV series, is a character driven by an addiction to death.

Presumed dead upon the completion of his bloody vengeance, Frank Castle destroys his Punisher suit and continues his existence as an outcast, beyond the borders of human community, under an assumed name. But when he learns that the gang war in which his family was killed had been only an elaborate cover-up for the crimes of his own brethren from the military, Castle once again assumes the mantle of Punisher. It is in fact an intriguing transformation, as if the man's vengeance could have been completed only by his vigilante persona, and the punishment of the wrongdoers would not have been valid nor justified without the presence of the uniform embellished with the insignia of death. The act of donning the recognizable black-and-white uniform symbolically transforms private vengeance into an instance of sacred retribution. Thus, once again the audience's attention is directed toward the figures of ancient Furies—the aggressively correcting forces of the moral order, something simultaneously more and less than human, remaining beyond the borders of community as the ultimate, sanctified guardians of its cohesion. When *thémis* is violated, the state of normalcy collapses, for the individual and for the community alike; the restoration of the order may be brought about only by equally abnormal forces. Hence, the Punisher's *mênis* transcends the realm of humans as a consequence—and a remedy—to the betrayal of *thémis*. The moral wounds of Frank Castle serve not only as means of rationalization of his behavior but also as a form of its legitimization. Indeed, it is through the occurrence of his moral wounds, through his experience of the ultimate

violation of *thémis* and his subsequent alienation, that Punisher attains the right—and the *de facto* obligation—to become a socially approved force of restoring the communal balance, created to avenge the fractured notion of “what’s right.”

Conclusion

The character of Punisher showcases the ambivalent attitude of the American society toward its veterans, rooted in the mixed feelings of responsibility, indebtedness and indifference to those who intentionally choose the military career paths (Eikenberry & Kennedy 2013; Pew 2011). Furthermore, both the Marvel comics and the Netflix’s TV series are an evocative testament to the deeply rooted American perception of the cultural interdependence between the notions of violence and justice. This perspective is fueled not only by long-established cultural patterns and traditions: from the concept of “regeneration through violence” and the pervading themes of savage war and captivity so aptly analyzed by Slotkin (1998a, 1998b, 2000), to the anti-relativist and highly individualized concept of reality underlying the Bill of Rights, but also by the common vision of the past, reiterated in the shared, negotiated contents of the social memory. The interconnection between violence as—even if not fully legitimate then at least emotionally defensible—means to attain justice and justice seen as an ideal embodied in the notion of the spirit of the law has been one of the foundational tenets of the American social identity. Furthermore, the character of the Punisher can be also viewed as a quintessential symbol of the conflicting yet inseparable American attitudes toward violence: the visceral, ecstatic “delight in seeing” (Gray 1998, 36), most vividly expressed in the aesthetic fetishization and cultural prominence of guns, and the repulsion rooted ultimately in the fear of pollution (Douglas 2003). Last but not least, the Punisher is a personified representation of post-war trauma, and his mythicized narrative serves as a highly effective medium in the process of communalization of trauma, synthesizing the content of individual traumatic experiences into a cohesive, relatable whole and transmitting it to the social, intersubjective sphere of awareness where it has a chance of becoming an accepted element of shared collective identity.

Marvel’s The Punisher constitutes a powerful pop-cultural image of a morally wounded veteran, but can also be seen as a potentially influential voice in the ongoing cultural negotiations concerning the contemporary contents of the American social memory (Halbwachs 1992) and, ultimately, social identity. The a-morality and destructive force of war, the plight of homecoming veterans and their troubles, from addictions, crimes, social maladaptation and suicides of individuals to inadequate social and institutional support offered them, has been the topic of many cultural artifacts—mostly related to the Vietnam War. The social and cultural effects of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq on the American society to this day are arguably nowhere near as influential as the output of the Vietnam era, which subsequently affected—in various, distinctive ways—the social memory, policies and the identity of the American society. Although the War on Terror has already produced a noticeable amount of cultural responses, from literary works: novels, autobiographies, reportages and non-fiction

books, to movies and TV series, most of them failed to elicit a general reaction or even reach a wider audience. It can be argued that with the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, the problems of war and its participants faded into the background of the dominating social discourse.

And yet the issue of war veterans seems to occupy a singularly important place in the American social subconscious. The uneasiness and ambivalence universally surrounding war as an unwanted chaotic intrusion into the *Lebenswelt* seems to spread to the soldiers, irrevocably tainting them with the mark of the Other: those possessing an experience beyond the limits of the socially shared reality. People in war perform acts beyond the scope of normal experience of members of modern, regulated societies; and even after returning to civilian life they cannot shed the realization of what they are able to—or made to—do. What had been indubitable for Greeks in ancient times remains so today. As symptoms of what is presently called “combat PTSD” are being analyzed in such diverse places and times as ancient Assyria (Abdul-Hamid & Hughes 2014) and modern day South Africa (Summerfield 2012), it becomes apparent that human experiences in war are a universal phenomenon, bridging otherwise seemingly impassable gaps between disparate civilizations and cultures. The fundamental message of the tragic costs of war—both for the involved nations and societies, as well as for individuals embroiled in conflict regardless of their wishes—needs to be heard all the louder in times of ostentatious jingoism and superficial praise for war heroes, which is completely disconnected not only from their treatment upon coming home, but even more from the reality of war. Modern societies tend to treat war as an instrument of politics, having read only the first few pages of Clausewitz (1997) and conveniently forgotten the experiences of their own members in uncountable wars. American flirtation with war, ostensibly rooted in the myth of “regeneration through violence,” but *de facto* originated on a much deeper level of the mythical reality of eternal return and the universal, dichotomous division between right and wrong, as well as—deeply religious in nature—the belief in necessity of sacrifice in defense of shared values, is only one, although admittedly particularly conspicuous, example of this worldview and its consequences.

The recent Netflix production, *Marvel's The Punisher*, a bloody and violent pop-cultural image of American social unconscious, boldly aims at broadcasting that message while at the same time paying a well-deserved—even if unintentional—homage to the cultural archetypes and traditions not only of modern America, but also, and more importantly, to ancient human myths. For the Punisher, as for Heracles, or Achilles, the occurrence of the violation of *thémis* transforms itself into a liminal experience, a point of no return: there can be no happy endings for heroes. The essence of the Greek concept of heroism is, after all, ambivalence: the hero, a half-deity destined to become larger-than-life, is the paradoxical personification of the best and the worst traits of humanity, revered and feared at once for its nearly unlimited potential (Nagy 1999; Papadopoulou 2004). The character of the Punisher, for all his outwardly American trappings: from the sense of patriotic duty and the ethos of a Western-bred vigilante, to the vast array of deadly combat skills and weapons, bears eerie resemblance to this

ancient concept of a hero.⁹ His story, substituting the allegorical figures of gods with the concept of human agency better suited to current sensibilities, nevertheless retains the acute sense of tragedy inherent in a hero's fate.

Dealing with increasingly valid and profound themes of traumatic war experiences, alienation and addiction to violence and vengeance in an entertaining, visually arresting way, *Marvel's The Punisher* may have a fighting chance of recommencing the wider social discourse concerning the concept of heroes, the dangers of war, its intrinsic amorality and the ethical responsibility of states and societies engaging in it. The cultural image of war prevailing in the majority of contemporary societies is one of a noble and worthy endeavor. What can be further from reality, in which so many human beings touched by war return irrevocably broken?

Notes

- 1 *Lebenswelt*, the "lifeworld," is the socially shared, intersubjective world of everyday life, founded on uncontested, obvious and common assumptions about its existence, as well as on preexisting socio-cultural structures. *Lebenswelt* is the area in which singular subjective perspectives of individuals can meet and, to a degree, share and partake in a broader, intersubjective perspective. See: Alfred Schütz, "On Multiple Realities", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1945, 5: 533–576, and *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Northwestern University Press 1967.
- 2 "Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans." Homer, *Iliad* 1:1-2, translated by Samuel Butler (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999); <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2199/2199-h/2199-h.htm>.
- 3 As the captivity narratives circulated in the Puritan colonies had recounted only the incidents of captives returned to their communities, carefully omitting stories of those who willingly remained with their captors in the Indian societies, the myth of necessity remains one-sided.
- 4 While there exist many superficial similarities between the two main Marvel superheroes representing the military, notably the Punisher and Steve Rogers as Captain America, the differences between them had been succinctly encapsulated by Mark Millar in the *Civil War* storyline, perfectly underscoring the significance of the post-Vietnam War trauma: "Same guy, different war". The Punisher, through the experience of identity-shattering moral wounds, finds himself incapable of forgiveness and of trust in social institutions, instead fully assuming the role of a lone avenger of justice. While the rigidity of his moral code, coupled with the unwavering belief that adherence to its tenets should be valued higher than life itself, is indeed singular, its contents are not dissimilar from those of Captain America. See: Mark Millar, Steve McNiven, *Civil War* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006).
- 5 The timeline for most of the comic book superheroes is changeable and slides forward to maintain an illusion of "now." The MAX imprint of Marvel, designated for mature readers, grounded the character of the Punisher within a set period. The other imprints, however, do slide his character forward in time, anchoring his veteran past to e.g. the first Persian Gulf War. See: Greg Rucka, Marco Checchetto, *The Punisher* (New York: Marvel Comics 2011–2012).

- 6 The fact that the concept of monomyth oversimplifies myths from various times and cultures in pursuit of some form of confirmation for the universal unity of the foundations of human psychology, emphasizing similarities (often misconstrued) and glossing over significant differences, is well known, and beside the point. More importantly, however, Campbell considers the mythical hero a personification of an individual's life path, and the heroic journey inherent in myths a pattern for individual spiritual growth. Jewett and Lawrence attempted to circumvent the limitations of Campbell's concept, delineating a particular variation of the monomyth they labeled uniquely American, molded upon tales of violent redemption instead of rites of passage: "A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity" (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 6). The analytical issues of the concept as well as the question of validity of examples provided by Jewett and Lawrence should not concern us here; however, the problem of the concept of the American Monomyth which directly pertains to the analysis of the phenomenon of the Punisher is twofold: firstly, it is based on an assumption that the American version of myth of redemption in the broad definition furnished by Jewett and Lawrence is somehow unique to the American cultural environment—it is not. Naturally, certain aspects, such as distrust of sexuality in general and the requirement of sexual abstinence of the redeeming hero in particular, as well as modern fetishization of guns, are indisputably more prominent in the American version of the myth, but its general structure closely corresponds to other redemptive tales from Indo-European culture, such as the twelve labors of Heracles, the myths of Theseus, or even the exploits of Knights of the Round Table. The various forms of the myth of redemption had been brilliantly examined by Mircea Eliade as iterations of the universal myth of the eternal return. The search for roots of the American Monomyth predominantly in the historical experience American society results in an important omission of the foundational role of older, archetypal myths—such as the myth of the eternal return. Secondly, and more importantly, the concept of American Monomyth continues to focus in Campbellian manner on the perspective of an individual, the journey of the redemptive hero, thus nearly completely overlooking the collective aspects of myth—mainly, the functions of myth such as social meaning-making and construction and explanation of intersubjective social reality, in which *thémis*, as a foundational axio-normative structure of the society creating the myths, plays a crucial role—as does violence. That said, the singular relationship of the United States with violence requires further analysis, which I intend to pursue beyond the scope of this article.

For the analysis of ubiquitous, or even universal nature of violence in the sacred in general, and in redemptive myths in particular, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2013), and Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959). On the social functions of myth, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

- 7 Eliade himself conducted an insightful analysis of the many contemporary ways in which "mythological stories" are "simply camouflaged under 'profane' forms" (Eliade 1963, 192), such as prose narratives, especially novels, or comic books. See: Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper Row, 1963).
- 8 The IMDB's rating is currently at 8.6/10, the second highest of all Netflix adaptations of Marvel comics to date, the Rotten Tomatoes score aggregating critics' reviews equal or higher than 3.5/5 is 62/100, and Metacritic score for S01 was 8.3/10 ("universal ac-

claim"). The RT audience rating for two seasons is 87%. See: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5675620/?ref_=nv_sr_1, <http://www.metacritic.com/tv/marvels-the-punisher>, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/marvel_s_the_punisher.

- 9 A particularly insightful analysis of the Greek concept of heroism can be found in John G. Fitch's *Introduction to Seneca's Hercules Furens*. See: Seneca, *Seneca's Hercules Furens. A Critical text with Introduction and Commentary*, edited by John G. Fitch (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1987), pp. 13–63.

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Response

Fitting into Place: A Response to Gruszczyk's "The Punisher: A Cultural Image of the 'Moral Wound'"

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Superheroes have been compared to classical heroes since their inception: Jerry Siegel reported inventing Superman while thinking of "a character like Samson, Hercules, all the strong men I'd heard tell of rolled into one" (Steranko 1970, 37-39). More recently, C.J. Mackie (2006) connects Superman to Achilles and Batman to Odysseus; in doing so, he reminds us that additions to a genre often arise in response to what has come before. The Punisher's first appearances in comics (*The Amazing Spider-Man*) and television (*Marvel's Daredevil*) place him in contexts that directly respond to earlier aspects of the genre.

As with most meetings between Marvel superheroes, in the Punisher's first appearances he is an antagonist for the established heroes. In the comics, the Jackal, relying on recent misinformation that Spider-Man is a murderer, hires the Punisher to kill Spider-Man (Conway & Andru 1974). Though the Punisher's motive is a mystery, his agenda is clear: he wants to eliminate crime and is willing to kill to do so. During their fight, Spider-Man convinces the Punisher that he is not a murderer, and the two-part ways without enmity. In *Daredevil*, they fight because Punisher is trying to kill a criminal who has gone to Murdoch's legal firm for protection.

If, as Gruszczyk asserts, the Punisher personifies a "response to the perceived outside threat to the shared notion of 'what's right,'" (p. 33) we can then analyze that personification in structural relation to other heroes. Daredevil and Spider-Man do not occupy the same position vis-à-vis Punisher: their motivations are quite different, as is the division between superhero and everyday identity. Daredevil's legal firm serves as extension of his superheroics. Spider-Man's reliance on photographing himself in action contributes to his income but is not otherwise related. Subsequent meetings between Punisher and Spider-Man tend to resemble their first meeting: the Punisher thinks he's a criminal, and Spider-Man has to convince him otherwise. Over years, the Punisher develops a relationship with the rest of the Marvel heroes, and only after some time does his willingness to kill become prominent. Over the course of just a few episodes of the Daredevil show, however, the Punisher tries to demonstrate to Daredevil the necessity of executing criminals, which makes their conflict as much philosophical as it is physical.

Gruszczyk's assessment of the moral wound at the heart of the Punisher cannot be extended to the superhero genre as a whole, which makes both the analysis and the Punisher valuable contributions to the genre. The trauma stimulating the superhero origin is not always moral in nature—there is no clear violation of *thémis* in Daredevil's origin. Spider-Man becomes a hero in large part because of guilt associated with the dire results of his own inaction—which we can theorize as a violation of *thémis* on his own part. Daredevil, by integrating civil and heroic identities as much as possible,

makes a stronger contrast with the Punisher because his profession is social and legal. Spider-Man's recurring message "With great power there must also come great responsibility" (Lee & Ditko 1962, 11) generalizes his experience but does not apply it to real-world contexts. Punisher's story, especially as told in the Netflix shows, provides a direct commentary on real-world social conditions, though heightened by the conventions of the superhero genre. This direct connection to real-world conditions makes the ambivalence apparent in Punisher stories all the more effective.¹

Gruszczyk's characterization of the moral wound inflicted when Punisher is ordered to do "the wrong thing while doing the right thing" (p. 36) does not fit the narratives of other superheroes. Superheroes are often born from trauma of some kind, be it the murder of their parents or having their inaction come back to haunt them. The superhero's pro-social mission (Coogan 2006) arises from personal injuries that reveal general problems. It is translated into ongoing narrative, which differentiates it from the heroes of ancient epic. Achilles returns to his society to assuage the effects of the violation of *thémis*. Odysseus returns home and learns how to appease Poseidon's wrath. Their stories end. The Punisher, like Spider-Man and Daredevil, is denied closure. Capturing the man who killed his uncle does not heal Spider-Man's self-inflicted wound. Daredevil is repeatedly confronted by the failings of the criminal justice system. The Punisher universalizes his own trauma, projects it onto criminals as a whole, and so his story does not conclude even after he gets revenge. The vigilante must remain vigilant.

Spider-Man and Daredevil resonate semantically with Americans, but they do not represent facets of the real world as clearly as the Punisher represents the horrors of war, and specifically the horrors of war brought home. Americans mythologize violence, but they do so at a distance. The ambivalence described by Gruszczyk is possible because the Punisher stories foreground his military training and weaponry, in stark contrast to Daredevil's acrobatics and billy club. The bright colors of most superhero costumes make them seem carnivalesque, and against them the black and white of the Punisher feels all the more realistic. The Punisher is possible only in the context of the post-1970s; his story is unimaginable amid the patriotic and pro-war iconography of the 1940s. His opposition to the typical superhero highlights the very ambivalence of Gruszczyk's conclusion. The Punisher brings the war home with him. His conflicts with other heroes reveal the versatility of the genre. It encompasses flights of fancy alongside profound contemplation of post-war conditions.

Notes

- 1 The film *The Punisher* (2004) excises the military connection, thereby eliminating the first of the two violations of *thémis* described by Gruszczyk. The removal might have affected the film's reception. It's worth noting that the Punisher has become iconic among some American military personnel (Collard 2015).

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