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Features: COMMENT:

Notebook One of these comic heroes really is dead

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This newspaper's obituary was the first to notice a delightful coincidence. **Jean Baudrillard** and Captain America died within a day of each other. One, the theorist of hyper-reality; the other, the guiding spirit of the most hyper-real nation on earth, as presented in one of its most hyper-real media.

Or, to be a little less pseudy about it: one, a controversial postmodern theorist; the other, a tights-wearing 66-year-old "super-soldier" with really stupid little wings on the side of his head and a round shield made of vibranium-steel alloy. Baudrillard is the first one.

Baudrillard, we can assume, really is dead. The death of "Cap" is a much dodgier proposition. Practically every major Marvel or DC hero - even Superman - gets killed off at some point, and then reappears shortly afterwards to pick up where he left off.

"Nobody stays dead in comics except Bucky, Jason Todd, and Uncle Ben," used to be the saying - referring, in turn, to Cap's original sidekick, the second Robin, and Spider-Man's uncle. Thanks to two recent reappearances, it has had to be amended.

Now the so-called Bucky Clause reads: "No one stays dead except Uncle Ben."

The exceptionally Baudrillardian world of comics - with its panoply of alternative dimensions and parallel time-lines, and its cast of shape-shifters, mind controllers, time-travellers and all-but-omnipotent cosmic entities - offers endless possibilities to revive characters.

One of the main tricks is "retconning" - that is, making retrospective continuity alterations, more or less subtle versions of saying "he wasn't killed in the explosion, he was just, um, buried under a pile of rubble and lost his memory for 40 years, but now he's back".

The world of mainstream superhero comics, then, is one of infinite plasticity in terms of events. At the same time, it is one of extreme moral rigidity: good and bad are minimally problematic, and minimally motivated. In real life, people stay dead and it's hard to work out who the baddies are; in comics the exact opposite obtains. The claim for which Baudrillard is most famous - that the first Gulf war "never happened" - did him little credit. He was guilty of extremely bad taste, and expressed himself in the sort of attention-grabbing, jokey way of continental philosophers - but his basic point about the extreme power of the mass media to construct reality for us is, I think, a sensible one.

What would have tickled him is the way that the Marvel Universe and the supposed real world have started to swap tropes.

"You're either with us, or against us," the captain of America told us in the real world. There were, we'll remember, attempts to "retcon" civil war in Iraq as "mission accomplished". Where did the WMD go? A parallel universe would be my guess.

Meanwhile, at the time Captain America died in the comic, nobody was any longer quite sure what he was supposed to stand for. "All the really hard-core Left-wing fans want Cap to be giving speeches on the street corner against the Bush administration, and all the really Right-wing fans want him to be over in the streets of Baghdad, punching out Saddam," said its writer Ed Brubaker.

So the comic, in its cheerily silly way, set about trying to mount a satirical critique of the real world. Cap ended up being shot by a sniper on the steps of a courtroom on his way to challenge the Superhero Registration Act, which he regarded as an erosion of civil liberties. Iron Man, that pillar of the military-industrial complex, was on the other side of the debate.

One of the accounts of Cap's death I read, incidentally, had his mask being taken away from the scene by the Punisher. The Punisher is one of Marvel's few morally ambiguous characters: a murderous vigilante. Subtle it ain't, but it's a nice touch.

See you, as they used to say, in the funny papers.

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