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FANTASIES OF RESISTANCE: NEIL GAIMAN’S “A STUDY IN EMERALD” AND BRYAN SINGER’S *X2:X-MEN UNITED*

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Abstract

The paper discusses Neil Gaiman’s critically acclaimed short story, “A Study in Emerald” (2003), and an early superhero film, Bryan Singer’s *X2:X-Men United* (2003), in terms of their portrayal of resistance under/to oppressive regimes – the eldritch abominations’ reign in alternative nineteenth-century Great Britain in Gaiman’s story, and, in Singer’s film, the law-suspending state of exception which produces bare life in the name of national security. The paper focuses on the critical and political potential of these narratives’ representations of resistance, situating and examining each within their respective relevant contexts (anarchism; Victorian economy and society; security; state of exception, and exceptionalism).

Key words

Bryan Singer; Neil Gaiman; resistance; Sherlock Holmes; X-Men

Introduction

The subject matter of this paper is the representation of resistance under/to oppressive regimes in two popular fantasy works, Neil Gaiman’s short story, “A Study in Emerald” (2003), and Bryan Singer’s *X2:X-Men United* (2003); the goal is to examine real-life critical and political potential, or lack thereof, of said representations. Set in alternative nineteenth-century Great Britain and featuring Sherlock Holmes and Lovecraft’s Great Old Ones, Gaiman’s story, it will be argued, celebrates violent anarchist resistance to eldritch abominations’ reign, yet depoliticizes historical anarchism by ascribing it to a pop culture icon; Holmes, moreover, is emphatically positioned as the defender of universal humanity rather than an anti-government revolutionary. Reserving monstrosity and otherness for the nonhuman Great Old Ones, Gaiman’s story may nonetheless inspire real-life resistance: not in its portrayal of alternative Holmes, but by depicting the socio-economic and cultural life of alternative Britain as largely unchanged in comparison with Victorian Britain, and inviting the reader to interpret this troubling

similarity. Singer's film, conversely, deploys "the mutant metaphor" (Darowski 2014) and the visual tropes of otherness in order to examine the law-suspending state of exception which, in the name of national security, produces bare life, here embodied by the mutants in the hands of the US military-scientific complex. The analysis of *X2:X-Men United* is informed by Giorgio Agamben's work, the seminal *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and *State of Exception* (2005). It is in the former that Agamben, inter alia, suggests a valid investigative methodology: "The correct question to pose concerning the horrors committed in the camps is [...] to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime" (Agamben 1998: 171). As if following the proposed methodology, *X2:X-Men United* lays bare these deployments of power: the film, it is argued, dramatizes the lethal consequences of the contemporary "rule by decree" and the suspension of law under conditions of factual or, increasingly, fictional danger.

Both works will be situated and examined within their respective relevant contexts, from the nineteenth-century reception of anarchism and Victorian economy and society, to the newly-emerged concepts such as security, state of exception, and exceptionalism. In addition to describing and discussing the specific regimes and the resistance they engender, the paper attempts to answer a more general question – do these popular fantasies express subversive insights and insurgent impulses? Are they simultaneously insightful and politically conservative? What is, ultimately, fantastic about them? Literary and film fantasy, of course, is always political, though the degrees of explicitness vary¹. But any movement away from consensus reality will inevitably prompt questions about the status of said reality; as such, fantasy in general can be an effective lens through which one can discuss, expose and problematize race, gender, class and species; disability; poverty; environmental and societal collapse as well as the possibility of their renewal, to name just a few. Nonetheless, fantasy – especially mainstream, popular culture fantasy which is under discussion in this paper – is more often conservative than not. Some examples that immediately come to mind include the deeply patriarchal depiction of gender in *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the *Harry Potter* series, the normalization of violence in *Game of Thrones*; the whiteness of the superheroes; their exaggerated masculinity or femininity confirming, and contributing to, harmful gender ideologies, etc.

Yet "A Study in Emerald" and *X2:X-Men United* are labelled fantasies of resistance not only because they are ostensibly written in fantasy mode and utilize fantastic figures such as mutants and monsters. These are fantasies of resistance, rather, in the everyday sense of the word (fantasizing, or daydreaming) precisely because their vision of resistance, as opposed to their depiction of oppression, is the least realistic part about them. As with the examples outlined above, this is obviously "an inevitability of their emergence from a mainstream that has always struggled with comprehensive systemic critique" (Frame 2019: 392). Gaiman's pastiche depicts literally horrific capitalist monarchy; in Singer's film, which came out in 2003, the focus is on the (ab)use of the state of emergency targeting the undesirables who are constructed as a national security threat, which cor-

responds to the real-life US War on Terror introduced in 2001. While the short story and the film are acute in their diagnoses of the Anglo-American society and politics in the nineteenth and the twenty-first century, the solutions they propose are simplistic, unrealistic, and politically conservative. Although Gaiman's story appears much more satisfying in advocating violent resistance to tyranny, that satisfaction comes at the price of Sherlock Holmes behaving out of character, and the depoliticising of anarchism. While deploying "the mutant metaphor" to display the effects of securitization, Singer's film, too, ends up reinforcing the significance of the political institutions such as the President of the United States, and recommending community-building to those targeted by exceptional measures, rather than any collective attempt at systemic transformation.

"The Prince was killed by a Rache": Fantasy anarchism and Sherlock Holmes

Neil Gaiman's critically acclaimed H. P. Lovecraft and A. C. Doyle pastiche – the short story "A Study in Emerald", written for the collection *Shadows over Baker Street* (2003) and the winner of the 2004 Hugo Award for Best Short Story (Gaiman 2007: 4–5) – romanticizes violent political resistance and Sherlock Holmes; Gaiman's Holmes, in particular, is both wildly aberrant from, and in keeping with, the canonical character created in 1887. The narration, with its omissions and false leads, and the story's thematic focus on deceptive appearances, moreover, result in unexpectedly complex politics in relation to monarchs, monsters, anarchists, and resistance, which will be addressed at the end of this section.

The story is set in alternative Great Britain, called Albion, and from the start seems to follow closely A. C. Doyle's 1887 novel *A Study in Scarlet*, famous for the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson: it opens with an unnamed narrator, a wounded war veteran who, having served in Afghanistan, is in search of affordable lodgings in London. The year is 1881; at the suggestion of a "mutual acquaintance" (Gaiman 2007: 28), the veteran is introduced to a white-coated man "in the chemical laboratories of St. Bart's" (28), who immediately utters the iconic "You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive" (28). The veteran goes on to move in with him, to the rooms in Baker Street, despite the man's keeping "irregular hours" and using their sitting room "to receive clients" (29), as he turns out to be a self-proclaimed "consulting detective" (31). The story then focuses on the case of a murdered royal, Queen Victoria's favourite nephew Franz Drago, who is found slaughtered in the squalid room in Shoreditch with the word "Rache" written on the wall. The room in which Prince Franz is murdered, moreover, is covered in the fluids from his body, as if "some hellish artist [...] had decided to create a study in emerald" (35).

For the greater part, the reader seems to be on familiar territory – the detective identifies the brand of tobacco by the ash left in the fireplace; Inspector Lestrade is reliably incompetent; the "street Arabs" deliver messages to the anxious gentlemen in 221B, Baker Street: hansom cabs are hired both for rides and important conversations, and the detective is the master of disguise. But the colours, as

seen in the quotation above, are not quite right: not only is the victim's blood green, but the Moon, the readers learn later, is red, too. The veteran, moreover, is wounded in the shoulder, and describes himself as a former crack-shot; it is the murder suspect, a tall actor called Sherry Vernet, who smokes Sherlock Holmes' trademark black shag rather than the consulting detective. As the story progresses, it becomes obvious that Albion, although populated by such stock Victorian figures as orange sellers, street urchins, and poverty-stricken acting troops, differs in some aspects from Victorian Great Britain, too: Albion's Queen Victoria is one of Lovecraft's Great Old Ones, who conquered the Earth seven hundred years earlier. Just like any human dictator, or a laissez-faire industrialist, these monsters claim to have brought "peace and prosperity" (Gaiman 2007: 53) to the terrorized population. In 1881 the reign of the Old Ones is global – there is "the Queen of Albion herself, and the Black One of Egypt (in shape almost like a man), followed by the Ancient Goat, Parent to a Thousand, Emperor of all China, and the Czar Unanswerable, and He Who Presides over the New World, and the White Lady of the Antarctic Fastness, and the others" (44) – though not uncontested, as proved by the narrator's stint in Afghanistan, whose "gods and men [...] were savages, unwilling to be ruled from Whitehall or from Berlin or even from Moscow" (28), and by the potentially revolutionary events in Russia alluded to at the very end of the story. Additional challenge to the Old Ones' rule is posed by the fictional anarchist group called The Restorationists, who, in the manner of historical anarchists from the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, target "crowned heads of Europe" (27) in order to spread both terror and inspiration.

Crucially for the story's politics in relation to monarchs, monsters, and anarchists, and in keeping with the theme of deceptive appearances, for the greater part of "A Study in Emerald" the savagery and inhuman violence remain consistently attributed only to the Afghan "gods and men" who torture imperialist crack-shots, and the murder suspects hunted by the consulting detective and Scotland Yard. "When a doctor goes to the bad, he is a fouler and darker creature than the worst cutthroat" (48), the consulting detective explains, for his working hypothesis is that the Prince was "eviscerated" by a "Limping Doctor" (with assistance from a "Tall Man"). Conversely, Queen Victoria, while monstrous in appearance, heals the narrator's shoulder, taking the pain away instead of inflicting it. Early on, as well, the consulting detective corrects Lestrade's parroting the official statement that the murdered Prince was in London for a "holiday and a change of air" – "For the theatres, the whores, and the gaming tables, you mean" (36) – yet this seems to convey the expected discrepancy between the public image and the private exploits of a privileged young man rather than heart-stopping evil. It is only in the suspect's letter/written confession near the end of the story that the monstrosity of the Prince, and by extension the rulers of the world, is revealed. Sherry Vernet, "the Tall Man", describes what Queen's favourite nephew did for amusement:

[...] having learned a little of his recreational predilections, I had told him I had procured for him a girl, abducted from a convent in Cornwall where she had never seen a man, and that it would only take his touch, and the

sight of his face, to tip her over into a perfect madness. Had she existed, he would have feasted on her madness while he took her, like a man sucking the flesh from a ripe peach leaving nothing behind but the skin and the pit. I have seen them do this. I have seen them do far worse. And it is not the price we pay for peace and prosperity. It is too great a price for that (53).

Proving the consulting detective right, Vernet – also known as Rache and, in our world, Sherlock Holmes – confesses to having murdered the Prince with his friend, “the good doctor”, who was waiting in the room “with his knives” (53)².

In Gaiman’s alternate history Britain ruled by one of Lovecraft’s Great Old Ones, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are, therefore, wanted criminals and anarchists, The Restorationists, “those who do not believe that the coming of the Old Ones was the fine thing we all know it to be” (50). Radicalized by the monstrosity of “the Old Ones” he has witnessed, Holmes becomes a revolutionary who signs himself as Rache, a hunting dog: in one of the finest instances of the story’s subverting expectations and playing with deceptive labels and appearances, the Prince, who is not human, is killed by the human who calls himself a dog. (The hunting dog, moreover, becomes a prey hunted by the police for this act.) On the subject of deceptive appearances, by now it is also clear that the narrator is not John Watson, but Sebastian Moran (at the very end the readers come across the initials S. M.), and that the brilliant consulting detective, so professional in serving his monstrous Queen, is his employer, Professor Moriarty. The story ends on a hopeful note: the narrator alludes to the “recent events in Russia”³ and expresses his fear that they will all be dead soon. The Tall Man and the Limping Doctor are not captured.

On the subject of resistance, “A Study in Emerald” primarily asserts the law-breaking heroism of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson against the ruthlessness of royal monsters, the elimination of which is represented as the condition for the survival of humanity: “they [the Restorationists] would see the old ways restored – mankind in control of its own destiny” (Gaiman 2007: 50). The romantic vision of violent political resistance posited at the beginning of this section is self-evident, too: there are literal monsters in power, and there are those who refuse to bow to them, killing them instead. The appeal of such heroes, and such resistance is undeniable; after all, “the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed” (Cohen 1996: 16). Therefore, it can be argued that “A Study in Emerald”, variously and correctly seen as a postmodern pastiche, Lovecraft/Holmes fanfiction, fantasy detective story and alternate history, is fundamentally a fantasy of resistance, where by “fantasy” it is understood not only the literary mode in which the story is written, but its daydreaming, romantic utilization of heroes and monsters.

But “A Study in Emerald” works on another level as well. The story, as already established, plays with deceptive appearances and the readers’ familiarity with the Holmes canon; as all fantasy, moreover, it is necessarily in dialogue with the real world. The Tall Man and the Limping Doctor, seditious anarchists and murderers, are revealed to have been heroic monster-killers all along, but this fantastic depiction has to be read against the historical context in which the

attributes of monstrosity were, indeed, reserved for the anarchists from Europe to the United States and Russia. While Peter Marshall summarizes the reception of anarchism and its practitioners allowing, at least, for the possibility of anarchist harmlessness – “Anarchists are dismissed as subversive madmen, inflexible extremists, dangerous terrorists on the one hand, or as naive dreamers and gentle saints on the other” (Marshall 2010: ix) – Elun Gabriel examines how late nineteenth-century anarchists were deliberately constructed as monsters in popular imagination in order to “obliterate the option of understanding anarchist acts as rational or political, substituting dread of the alien and unknown for an analysis of the social context that gave rise to anarchism” (Scott ed. 2007: 103). Even ordinary oppressed people, as Emma Goldman notes, were not necessarily sympathetic to the anarchist cause, resorting to tropes of monstrosity in relation to anarchists: “The ignorant mass looks upon the man who makes a violent protest against our social and economic iniquities as upon a wild beast, a cruel, heartless monster” (Goldman 1911: 119). Thus, on the terrain of the fantasy nineteenth century, Gaiman seems to rehabilitate this monsterized form of political resistance as an act of humanism, especially when the practitioners are such popular, much-loved figures as Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. But there is a significant difference between historical anarchism and Gaiman’s fantasy one, which is difficult to ignore. Namely, Sherry Vernet and the Limping Doctor act motivated by their belief in human supremacy; it is not monarchy, or economic system that they are against, only the specific creatures who occupy the throne. In essence, while Vernet and his Doctor do behave like that minority of the late-nineteenth and the early-twentieth century anarchists who resorted to the assassination of royals, their motivation is not philosophical or political anarchism, the desire to “repudiate the government of man by man, whatever shape it assumes” (Kropotkin 1898), but, rather, the belief in human supremacy, and in the implicit justice precisely of that government of man by man (or a woman) that anarchist theorists found intolerable. In his written confession, Vernet even explicitly admits to Moriarty that “it was good to feel that, if only for a moment, I had a worthy adversary. Worthier by far than inhuman creatures from beyond the Pit” (53). Therefore, as already stated, Gaiman’s vision of Sherlock Holmes is both wildly aberrant from, and in keeping with, the canonical character created by Arthur Conan Doyle. Holmes as a political murderer and an outlaw is obviously far from Doyle’s detective who is famously not interested in politics⁴; but this Holmes, elevated to the rank of “humanity’s defender”,⁵ is primarily invested in policing the human-nonhuman border, just like the canonical one who kept the late-Victorian boundaries of race, class, and gender safe⁶ (these, needless to say, also deployed discourses of humanity and nonhumanity).

It is the unstable, shifting nature of monstrosity that holds much greater potential for political engagement, at least for the reader with some historical knowledge of Victorian Britain. At one point, the narrator, who was once a crack-shot serving in Afghanistan, averts his eyes from actors and actresses “taking off their makeup and costumes with no regard to the properties of gender” (45), since it is this impropriety, rather than Albion’s imperialism or literal monsters on the throne, that he finds offensive. The narrator, moreover, is not alone in

his easy cohabitation with violence done to others. On the level of everyday life, Victoria's human subjects vie for economic and physical survival in ways that tend to involve harming others and profiting on it. As in Victorian Britain, there is police and army; there are imperialist wars and slums, such as St. Giles, "where the police will not go except by the dozen" (Gaiman 2007: 54); there are brothels, and madhouses open to visitors. The story is peppered with newspaper advertisements humorously referencing *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, but targeting physical ailments and existential dread experienced by historical Victorians. Finally, Queen Victoria is described as "huge, huger than I had imagined possible" (39), and her consort, Prince Albert, is "undeniably and entirely human" (39). Details such as these steadily build the impression that fantastic Albion is virtually identical with historical Britain, further implying that their monarchs are interchangeable, too. Historical Victoria and Gaiman's Lovecraftian Victoria are both huge, both consorting with Prince Albert, and, crucially, they both preside over kingdoms and empires where the less fortunate portion of the population is sucked dry, driven mad, consumed and discarded by those in power, metaphorically and literally. It is the Prince's consumption of the innocent girl as the act of unspeakable evil which radicalizes Vernet-Holmes: far from any kind of political radicalism, John Ruskin wrote about the Britain's multitudes being sent "like fuel to feed the factory smoke" (Ruskin 1880: 163). Countless Victorian reformists and philanthropists, too, commented in horror on the broken bodies of ghostlike children employed in factories and starving in the slums. In this context, the Prince's recreational destruction of the helpless merely offers a concentrated image of the much more dispersed and widespread historical violence: there is ultimately no difference between the Great Old Ones and the historical laissez-faire capitalists who filled their workers' lungs and blood with coal dust, lead, mercury, and phosphorus, forcing them to partake in the massive destruction of the natural world in the name of "peace and prosperity". By introducing Queen Victoria as the Lovecraftian Great Old One, yet portraying the alternative Britain's socio-economic landscape as fundamentally unchanged, "A Study in Emerald" invites such reflections: it is here that non-fantastic resistance may begin, though Gaiman does not pursue it any further.

"We are not enemies, but friends": Mutants resisting securitization and exceptionalism

Bryan Singer's 2003 film *X2:X-Men United*⁷, the second instalment in the *X-Men* movie series, examines and heavily polarizes resistance options for the minority group which is constructed as a national security threat and, as such, exposed to considerable governmental violence under the conditions of (undeclared) state of exception. Appearing in the early years of the post-9/11 War on Terror, the film ostensibly continues the theme the *X-Men* comics are famous for – the exploration and the condemnation of prejudice against the non-normative "others" through the infinitely applicable "mutant metaphor" (Darowski 2014) – but it is equally about the production and treatment of terrorist "bare life" proceeding

from the entwined policies of securitization and exceptionalism. More specifically, *X2* depicts the suspension of law and the attending abolition of political and human rights for certain sections of the population (what Agamben terms “state of exception”), which is committed in the name of national security, and which entails the “policies and the practices” that Andrew W. Neal groups under the general term “exceptionalism” (Neal 2009: 1). Reading *X2* in the context of the state of exception, securitization and the production of “bare life” targeted by exceptionalism, moreover, inevitably highlights the limitations of the message that *X-Men* movies, including this one, routinely send – that prejudice can be solved through acceptance, mutual understanding, and tolerance of others. While the message appears summarized in the deceptive phrase quoted in the title of this section, what the viewers witness in *X2* is, rather, the opposite: the impossibility of friendship in face of exceptionalism sanctioned by the very President of the US and carried out by its military-scientific complex. (At some point it also becomes clear that the threat posed before the mutants-as-terrorists is a war waged by the state against them, and not only social prejudice.⁸) Finally, the resistance strategies that are displayed in the film – both those that are clearly preferred and those that are clearly condemned – are equally impossible for real-life application. In this sense, *X2*, just like “A Study in Emerald”, is fundamentally a fantasy of resistance, incisive and acute in its diagnosis of the lethality of contemporary (anti-) politics, yet lacking in a realistic strategy of resistance.

Before discussing the mutant resistance under state of exception as a fantasy, however, several terms require some clarification. Very briefly, “state of exception” is the concept discussed in Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and *State of Exception* (2005). Agamben starts from the position that the state of exception “was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger” (Agamben 1998: 139) – in Roman law, specifically, the state of lawlessness following the death of a sovereign called *justitium* – but his work goes on to argue that the suspension of law, far from being exceptional, has since World War One become “a paradigm of [modern] government” (Agamben 2005: 7). The modern state of exception, exemplified by Nazi Germany, Agamben continues, “is given a permanent spatial arrangement” in the concentration camp, “which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order” (Agamben 1998: 139). The Italian philosopher also names the figure bearing the brunt of the suspension of law and political rights as materialized in the camp: *homo sacer*. Appearing in ancient Roman law, *homo sacer* refers to the man who can be killed with impunity, but not sacrificed or executed. Agamben interprets this human figure as the embodiment of “bare life”, or *zoe*, which is human life stripped of all legal and political rights and exposed to death. The stripping of rights and legal protection is crucial for the definition of “bare life” as this is “a life that can *only* be taken away without the law’s authority or mediation” (Norris ed. 2005: 49, italics added). In an attempt to correct Foucault’s chronology of biopolitics, Agamben, moreover, postulates that “the production of a biopolitical body [i.e. bare life] is the original activity of sovereign power” (Agamben 1998: 83), and not a distinctly modern phenomenon as Foucault argues: hence Agamben’s reliance on both ancient Roman law and the

twentieth-century Nazism in his discussion of the state of exception, sovereignty and bare life (specifically: “from a juridical standpoint the entire Third Reich can be considered a state of exception that lasted twelve years” (Agamben 2005: 2)).

On the other hand, exceptionalism, coined by Andrew W. Neal, refers to “an array of violent and illiberal practices” put into practice after 9/11 and virtually synonymous with the War on Terror, such as “detention without trial, extraordinary rendition, derogations from human rights law, sanction or connivance in torture, the curtailment of civil liberties and aggressive war against international law” (Neal 2009: 1). Exceptionalism goes hand in hand with the growing securitization of life in the present moment, where “security has to read through the lens of national security” (Waever in Buzzan and Hansen eds 2007: 69) as it infiltrates more and more areas of individuals’ private life, allowing for the “vastly expanded realms of surveillance” (Riofrancos 2020), and the destruction of the very liberties these measures are (supposedly) deployed to protect.

The plot of *X2* recalls *justitium*, as the film is set in motion when an unidentified mutant teleport (later revealed to be Kurt Wagner, or Nightcrawler) attacks the United States President in the White House. While the attack is thwarted, the mutant manages to stab the President’s desk: the close-up shows a knife with the red ribbon tied around it bearing the words “MUTANT FREEDOM NOW”. The X-Men, used to keeping a low profile⁹, are immediately alarmed at the news of the attempted assassination. Storm voices their collective fears that “[t]hey’ll reintroduce the Registration Act”; Charles Xavier adds another possibility: “Or worse, the President could declare a state of emergency. Place every mutant in the country under arrest”. Yet there is an even worse option: not the publicly declared state of emergency that might result in all the mutants being arrested under an unjust legal act, but the undeclared state of exception where the abovementioned “violent and illiberal practices” could be deployed against the mutants, who are now conceived as an actual security threat, and thus placed outside of the rule of law altogether – terrorist *homines sacri*. And that is exactly what happens. In a perfect illustration of the law-suspending “rule by decree” (Agamben 1998: 168), or “the essential characteristic of the state of exception – the provisional abolition of the distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers” (Agamben 2005: 7), it is the President who makes an executive decision, bypassing the legal procedures, and gives permission to Colonel Stryker to raid X-Mansion and abduct the mutant children. The President’s explicit concern, moreover, is not the violation of the human and political rights of American citizens, but rather that this action does not reach the public – as he is fully aware of the extent of the violence he allows: “William, you enter, you detain, you question, but the last thing we need to see is the body of a mutant kid on 6.00 news”. The army raids X-Mansion, and kidnaps some of the mutant children, who are later discovered and freed from the Alkali Lake Industrial Complex. Colonel Stryker, who once filled Wolverine’s skeleton with adamantium, intends to test Cerebro’s¹⁰ lethality on them, because he is “a scientist”. Stryker’s intent, which is justified in his mind by the conviction that “mutants serve their purpose, as long as they can be controlled”, links the treatment of the fictional mutant children stripped of legal and human rights with the well-documented medical experimentation practiced

by the historical Nazi doctors on the concentration camps' *homines sacri*.¹¹ The creation of the possibility of experimenting on, and killing the mutant children – who, until President's sovereign decision, were US citizens – in the camp-like location, without either legal obstacles or consequences, illustrates the most dangerous aspect of the state of exception: “[the nature of] the acts committed during the *justitium* [...] seems to escape all legal definition. Because they are neither transgressive, executive, nor legislative, they seem to be situated in an absolute non-place with respect to the law” (Agamben 2005: 50). The scene of the army raiding X-Mansion is significant, also, for foregrounding the full power of the US military before which the mutant children are ultimately helpless, although they do put up a fight resorting to their unique mutant abilities. The scene, in other words, very eloquently conveys who the real security threat is.

Mutant children asleep in their beds are not only targeted for “extraordinary rendition” by the fully armed adult men: they are taken to the seemingly abandoned Alkali Lake Industrial Complex, which is obviously a camp “outside the normal order” (Agamben 1998: 139), just like the plastic prison in which Magne-to is subjected to torture and mind-altering drugs (“enhanced interrogation” as another feature of exceptionalism, especially when dealing with suspected terrorists). In an underground cell in this camp, Charles Xavier, too, will be subjected to the mind-altering hallucinations coming from Stryker's mutant son, another *homo sacer* who is both disowned (“My son is dead”), and instrumentalized by his father. Crucially, this deployment of extraordinary, violent and illegal measures against the mutants who are transformed into radically unprotected bare life is justified not only by the threat that the mutants allegedly pose to national security, but by their already indeterminate status, as well. While it is undeniable that Marvel's mutants “have been increasingly inscribed with allegorical Otherness” (Lund 2015), the film's insistence on biology and evolution ironically contributes to the confusion regarding both their human and political status, and helps solidify them as bare life in Aristotle's sense of the word: a version of human life not necessarily tied to, and protected within, any political community. This is evident from the very beginning, as *X2* opens with a voiceover from Charles Xavier, who delivers a speech which both establishes the “mutant metaphor” and puts the mutants in the position of “persecuted minority”:

Mutants. Since the discovery of their existence, they have been regarded with fear, suspicion, often hatred. Across the planet, debate rages. Are mutants the next link in the evolutionary chain...or simply a new species of humanity, fighting for their share of the world? Either way, it is a historical fact: sharing the world has never been humanity's defining attribute.

Moreover, the last words heard in the film, spoken by another scientist, Dr Jean Grey, firmly situate the mutants as natural products of evolution: “Mutation. It is the key to our evolution. It is how we evolved from a single-celled organism into the dominant species on the planet [...] every few hundred millennia evolution leaps forward”. While these words directly respond to, and repudiate, the notion that mutants are unnatural, as Colonel Stryker believes¹², they also establish the

mutants as mere natural life, which, however new and/or superior, is ultimately helpless without a proper political community – as the US apparently is not such a community¹³. Thus, the mutants' position is already precarious in the sense that they both are, and are not, humans and citizens with inalienable rights, as evidenced by the effortlessness with which The Mutant Registration Act is proposed and nearly passed in the previous instalment (*X-Men*, 2000). The state of exception merely pushes them over the always-present edge, transforming them into a target for a whole array of exceptional measures.

The precariousness of the mutants' human and citizen status is not only a plot element but informs the film's aesthetic; it is conveyed through the visual tropes of otherness, and the literal positioning of the mutant characters outside of the usual social order – outside of the sites associated with “proper” or “regular” humanity. The function of such tropes and positioning is twofold. In an economic and effective manner, they convey to the viewer that mutants do differ from ordinary humans. But they can also be read as a comment on the effects of exceptionalism and the state of exception which, in the name of security, strips the citizens (extraordinary citizens, but citizens nonetheless) of their human and civil rights and leaves them exposed to abuse – like concentration camps' inmates, or nonhuman animals. It is no accident that the kidnapping of the mutant children in the raid scene is foreshadowed by the TV program watched by a sleepless mutant child moments before the attack: a documentary about the rat babies being helpless without the mother rat, as “someone uninvited has some to dinner.” Animality as a trope of difference is evident in Nightcrawler's first appearance, too. His bared teeth, a long tail, his knife-bearing arm, poised to strike a human being, all powerfully convey the dangers of an animal – another Rache attempting to kill the Prince – but the fact that Nightcrawler's skin is dark blue and covered in elaborate markings suggests that this animal is not only dangerous, but, in keeping with Colonel Stryker's belief, unnatural as well. Memorable examples of the film's signalling the mutants' genetic and enforced difference also include Magneto, all in white, in his plastic prison cell; the animal-like Wolverine standing outside of the frozen gate of Alkali Lake Complex, paired with a lone wolf; Storm and her white, blind eyes at times when she controls the weather; Scott and his always heavily covered eyes. Charles Xavier facing Jason Stryker, in an underground cell of the abandoned Alkali Lake Complex, is another illustration of the film's deployment of the tropes of otherness to display the dangers of the state of exception and securitization. It is no accident that the two mutants' positions are identical: both are disabled, and in wheelchairs. Whereas Jason is in a hospital gown, with visible lobotomy scars and different-coloured eyes, Xavier, with a metal contraption on his head, is still wearing his elegant suit. Nonetheless, one is the mirror image of the other; Jason as bare life radically unprotected by law embodies the always present potential for all mutants to be reduced to this – even the wealthy, educated ones like Charles Xavier. The locations in which the mutants find themselves, willingly or by force, are also outside of the normal human order, both materially and metaphorically – plastic prisons; secret underground torture facilities; an abandoned Boston church. Even X-Mansion differs from ordinary schools and human public spaces. All these visual tropes serve to establish

the mutants' irreconcilable otherness in comparison with the "regular" humans, but not only that: as the short and disastrous stay of the mutants (Wolverine, Rogue, Bobby Drake and John "Pyro") at Bobby Drake's house proves, the police are called to punish their attempt at crossing over into "regular" human spaces – in this instance, the middle-class family home. The punishment is nothing less than death, as evidenced by Wolverine being shot in the head the moment he attempts to demonstrate that he cannot retract his claws as quickly as the policemen request. It appears that between the army and the police, the POTUS and the ordinary, police-phoning Americans, the mutants, constructed as a security threat, literally have no place to exist. And because most of them are visibly different from regular humans, and suspected of terrorism, they are treated as nonhumans, animals or monsters – with considerable, unpunishable violence.

By now, it is obvious that *X2* is indeed incisive and acute in its diagnosis of the lethality of contemporary law-suspending exceptionalism and securitization, which it tries to counteract by humanizing the mutants through problematic appeals to evolution and nature. (The appeal to the authority of nature goes as far as the sentence "Nature laughs last", spray-painted on the wall, which is clearly visible at one point in the film.) But the theme that we follow in this paper is resistance: how does Singer's film imagine and portray resistance of the mutant *homines sacri* to the violence of the state of exception, which is evidently depicted in great detail? If the state of exception is synonymous with the establishment of "a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system" (Agamben 2005: 2), how do the targeted sections of the population – not necessarily proper citizens anymore – survive and resist it? Also, and perhaps more importantly, is there any possibility of resistance which would be distinct from (physical) survival? Does *X2* imagine political alternatives, call for a systemic change, or even collective armed resistance?

It is in its imagining of resistance that *X2* reveals itself as a politically conservative fantasy. Namely, in the film, resistance options for the mutants appear polarized between the two characters, Charles Xavier (Professor X), and Erik Lehnsherr (Magneto). Xavier, for his part, creates a small community, physically separated from the rest of society. While still vulnerable to state intervention and exceptional policies, this community is nonetheless funded by immense money, as evidenced by X-Mansion. Situated in Westchester County, New York, the majestic building serves as a private academy for young mutants, as well as the X-Men headquarters, having at its disposal the technology that can rival or even surpass that of the American army – the stealth airplane that Storm and Jean fly to Boston, for instance, but also Cerebro. But X-Mansion is primarily a boarding school which houses and educates "gifted youngsters"; X-Men count among their members Dr Jean Gray, who is not only highly educated and eloquent on mutant issues (*X-Men*, 2000), but also a very attractive woman whose mutations are not (immediately) visible. The resistance option Professor X represents, therefore, centres on a non-violent attempt to alter the public opinion on mutants through education, and preaching friendship and tolerance to both mutants and ordinary humans without challenging the existing socio-political order in any way.

The education of the public, moreover, is committed to the non-threatening, even attractive mutants passing as ordinary humans, presumably to make the lesson more palatable. Magneto, on the other hand, insists on war. Having spent his childhood in Auschwitz where he was forcibly separated from his parents (*X-Men*, 2000), and where his mother was killed before his eyes to trigger his metal-manipulating abilities (*X-Men: First Class*, 2011), he is understandably much less inclined to trust human capacity for tolerating otherness. Yet Magneto is clearly positioned as a villain in the film: when Stryker forces Charles Xavier to find all the mutants and eliminate them through Cerebro, Magneto intervenes only to have Xavier targeting all the humans instead. Thus, it seems that the film clearly favours peaceful resistance in the form of building a community (for the mutants, on the basis of shared precariousness), and educating both the mutants and ordinary humans into mutual acceptance and tolerance. This preference seems further strengthened by the resolution of Wolverine's subplot, which ends with Wolverine abandoning the search for his memory and identity. In his first appearance in *X2*, the mutant is depicted standing in front of the frozen gate surrounding Alkali Lake Industrial Complex, attempting to piece together the story of his past; his search ends on the same location, this time with a rescued mutant boy in his arms and a defiant reply to Stryker, "I'll take my chances with him", after the Colonel taunts him that he will never recover his memory. While at the end of the previous film, *X-Men* (2000), Wolverine leaves X-Mansion to go on this search, here he clearly chooses commitment over individualism, and mutant community as his home. But the fantastic aspect of this community, which provides the much-needed shelter from intolerance and prejudice, is that is clearly based on the wealth and the resources that real-life human beings who are targeted and victimized by exceptional policies do not have access to. Nor is the violent resistance of the kind exhibited by Magneto and his army of powerful mutant outcasts a viable option, either.

Yet, it is not only Magneto as one of the film's villains who engages in violence – the mutant children who are forcibly taken by the US Army are equally forcibly released by the X-Men. There is, thus, a discrepancy between the preaching of tolerance and acceptance on the one hand, and what the viewers see in the film, on the other. "We are not enemies, but friends", as already stated, is sharply contrasted with the actual behaviour of POTUS who wields the state of exception machinery against the mutants, but also with the supposedly harmless mutants who resort to violent self-defence. The film thus attempts to perform the balancing act between the ostensible liberal message of education, tolerance, and acceptance, and the spectacular violence in keeping with the demands of the superhero genre. The mutant violence can also be interpreted as implicit acknowledgement that preference for non-violence is both ideologically and politically suspect, as well as the marker of class privilege. Here it is worth recalling Arundhati Roy's comment from a 2011 interview, "Non-violence is a piece of theatre. You need an audience. What can you do when you have no audience? *People have the right to resist annihilation*" (Moss 2011, italics added). *X2* seems to add that mutants, as the next link in the human evolutionary chain, have the right to resist annihilation, too, by whatever means necessary.

The last scene additionally problematizes the non-violent resistance represented by Charles Xavier and his X-Men, which is apparently endorsed by the film makers. As the President delivers a speech live in front of the cameras about the “growing threat within our own population” – the speech which deliberately echoes the one given by George W. Bush only two years earlier, at the inception of the War on Terror¹⁴ – Xavier freezes time, and the X-Men hand over the Stryker files, which contain evidence that Nightcrawler’s attack was orchestrated by Stryker in order to initiate the state of exception and start a war against mutants. The country is thus literally frozen on the brink of a civil war, and it is Charles Xavier who, in opposition to George W. Bush, frames it as “a moment to repeat the mistakes of the past, or to work together for a better future”, though he never specifies what that future might entail, socially, politically, or legally, for either humans or mutants. He also warns, “We’re here to stay, Mr President. The next move is yours”, to which Wolverine adds, “We’ll be watching.” While it is possible to read this particular scene as mutants appropriating and weaponizing surveillance that has long been turned against them, the scene, in fact, confirms the significance of the political institution such as POTUS. It is the President who, in the manner of Carl Schmitt’s sovereign, early on in the film decides on the state of exception, and it is the President, too, who in the end behaves rationally and saves the country from the civil war, by trusting the mutants. It is worth noting that this orientation towards the personal qualities of national leaders is, in fact, hinted at throughout the film, in the scenes featuring T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King* (1958). White’s tetralogy appears twice in *X2*: Magneto is depicted reading it in his plastic prison; at the end of the film, Xavier asks his students “Have you read *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White?” The title refers to King Arthur of the medieval romances, or the fantasy of yet another good sovereign whose personal qualities ensure the stability of his country, and, implicitly, the continuation of the socio-political status quo.

Conclusion

Both “A Study in Emerald” and *X2:X-Men United* imagine and portray resistance to oppressive regimes practiced by those who are ruled or targeted by repressive policies and governmental violence. In Gaiman’s short story, the regime is the eldritch abominations’ reign of terror, situated in alternate, yet disturbingly familiar nineteenth-century Great Britain. Disturbing familiarity characterizes the vision of the USA in which *X2* takes place, too, as the state of exception producing bare life in the name of national security is, indeed, the hallmark of the post-9/11 American foreign and, increasingly, domestic politics. The two narratives, nonetheless, differ in how they imagine resistance. “A Study in Emerald” romanticizes violent anarchist methods, specifically, the assassination of (monstrous) royals, without any explicit engaging with the anarchist politics or ideology. *X2* polarizes peaceful and violent resistance via Professor X and Magneto, though strict polarization, it has been argued, crumbles down upon closer examination, and in favour of the personal qualities of the sovereign.

Some similarities between the two narratives can be located in their treatment of violence, since in both of them violence is justified if used against monsters, for the liberation of humanity, or for self-defence; it is unacceptable when it is strictly political, and utilized for the potential regime change. Gaiman's murderous Restorationists, after all, do not object to monarchy as a socio-political system, only the specific nonhuman being who occupies the throne. Despite their appropriation of anarchist methods, Vernet and the Limping Doctor are thus militant "human rights" activists, rather than proper anarchists. Professor X's mission, too, is to educate both the public and other mutants into mutual tolerance and acceptance. There is no indication that he is interested in changing the regime, as opposed to the radically different ambition displayed by Magneto. Moreover, the emphasis on private, sheltered communities and the political institution such as POTUS make Professor X's option – unambiguously preferred by the film – politically conservative, confirming Danny Finger's assessment that "villains in comic books are agents of change, in contrast to the heroes, who are the protectors of the status quo" (quoted in Deflem ed. 2010: 34).

Yet despite the conservative, seemingly non-violent option represented by Professor X, his X-Men do engage in violent conflicts with the US Army led by Colonel Stryker. Unlike "A Study in Emerald", which romanticizes violence and assassination as a form of resistance *against monsters*, Singer's film appears engaged in a balancing act between preaching tolerance and acceptance, and allowing the mutants to practice spectacular violence against well-armed humans, and one weaponized mutant, in self-defence. It is worth noting, moreover, that any solidarity between the mutants and humans, which is so poignantly portrayed at the beginning of *X-Men: Days of Future Past*¹⁵, is virtually non-existent in this film, resulting in further promotion of the self-isolation for the mutants, and preventing even the possibility of collective, organized resistance to the abuses associated with the state of exception's law-suspension. Still, the film is not devoid of the critical and political potential, which lies in its utilization of the "mutant metaphor", conveyed through visual tropes of otherness, to display the horrific effects of the state of exception's suspension of law in the name of security. This abolition of human and political rights for some sections of the population results in the mutants being "so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime" (Agamben 1998: 171).

Ultimately, both "A Study in Emerald" and *X2:X-Men United* can be seen as fantasies of resistance, portraying resistance to the oppressive regimes and policies through the depoliticized tropes of heroism and monstrosity, or by endorsing the dream of well-funded communities in which preaching and practising tolerance are significantly less challenging than in real life. Such portrayals, finally, make it abundantly clear why it is difficult to "regard popular culture as a source of, or incitement to, revolutionary social action or transformation" (Lipschutz 2010: 164).

Notes

- ¹ A rare example of an explicit mainstream fantasy is Guillermo del Toro's *Pan Labyrinth* (2006), which depicts real-life political, armed, and violent resistance in the character of Pedro and his fellow partisans. Near the end of the film, they finally appear from the mountain forest in which they have been hiding, and Pedro shoots the only proper monster in the film, Captain Vidal – by that point, Vidal has already shot and lethally wounded his stepdaughter, Ofelia. Pedro and his fellow fighters' appearance from the darkness of the forest seems reminiscent of the partisans' promise in Hy Zaret's adaptation of "La Complainte du Partisan", the song popularized by Leonard Cohen in 1969 – that, when freedom comes, "we'll come from the shadows". Instead of valorising the symbolic resistance of the child's imagination, which would be expected of a fantasy director, throughout the film, del Toro draws a parallel between the partisans' and Ofelia's refusal to bow to fascism embodied in Vidal, thus paying homage to the material resistance as well.
- ² While there are considerable changes Gaiman introduces in relation to both Sherlock Holmes and John Watson (their social standing and their legal status, for example), what remains unchanged in this alternate history is Holmes's relationship with "John (or perhaps James) Watson" (Gaiman 2007: 55), which is evident in the warmth and the obvious respect with which Vernet/Rache writes about his friend, even more so in the trust implicit in their doing the bloody work of monster-killing together. In a lovely metafictional comment on the canonical Holmes and Watson, Gaiman even has Vernet literally perform the roles written for him by his doctor-friend, "for he has some crowd-pleasing skills" (Gaiman 2007: 53). In a metafictional comment on his own Holmes and Watson, moreover, Gaiman (44) has Vernet perform the role of a hero who "beat the priest to death with his own crucifer, and prepared to welcome Them [the Old Ones] as They came", in the play watched by Moriarty and Moran. Yet the first play that the pair see, crucially, is a Wildean comedy of mistaken identities, also starring Sherry Vernet and suggesting that in this story labels and appearances are not to be trusted: heroes are villains and vice versa.
- ³ The narrator probably alludes to the historical assassination of Tzar Alexander II by the members of the anarchist group Narodnaya Volya, or People's Will, in 1881 (Marshall 2010: 470). Even in this detail "A Study in Emerald" remains committed to false leads and deceptive appearances, as Gaiman's Tzar Alexander is the Great Old One, "Czar Unanswerable" and a monster, whereas historical Alexander was nicknamed "Liberator" for his abolition of serfdom in 1861, and was known for his commitment to social and political reform.
- ⁴ In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson remarks that "his [Holmes's] ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of contemporary literature, philosophy and politics he appeared to know next to nothing. Upon my quoting Thomas Carlyle, he inquired in the naivest way who he might be and what he had done" (Doyle 2001: 11). Later on, Watson famously classifies Holmes's "limits" and includes "4. Politics.—Feeble" (12). Unlike the loyal doctor, Harry Bradbeer's 2020 film, *Enola Holmes*, explicitly calls out Holmes on his complacency and privilege: "Politics doesn't interest you. Why? (...) Because you have no interest in changing a world that suits you so well".
- ⁵ This designation comes from the Preface to *Shadows over Baker Street*: again, it is important to position "defender of humanity" against the diametrically opposite assessment by Theodore Roosevelt at the end of the nineteenth century: "Anarchism is a crime against the whole human race and all mankind should band against anarchists" (qtd in Marshall 2010: ix).
- ⁶ See, for instance, Jann 1990; Otis 1998; Siddiqi 2006.
- ⁷ Hereafter the title will be abbreviated as *X2*.
- ⁸ War, or civil war in particular, is an important motive in the film. The quotation in

the title of this section comes from the speech quoted in the first minutes of the film. After the voiceover from Charles Xavier which ponders on the indeterminate and precarious status of the mutants, there is another voiceover, from a guide quoting the words of Abraham Lincoln to the group of tourists visiting the White House: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break the bonds of our affection.” These words, uttered by Lincoln in his first inaugural address as the 16th president of the USA, point to the X-Men’s politics of tolerance and acceptance. Yet it is equally significant that Lincoln’s words addressed the country ravaged by a civil war, and can therefore be read as a warning of history repeating, this time not between the North and the South, but between the humans and the mutants. It is not a coincidence that Colonel Stryker, who orchestrated the attack on the POTUS in order to usher in the state of exception and the deployment of exceptional measures against the mutants, tells Mystique in disguise: “This already is a war”.

⁹ This is evident from the parallel scene which depicts Xavier’s Gifted Youngsters in a museum, where one of the mutant boys is explicitly reminded by Storm not to call attention to his (visible, animalistic) mutation: “Artie, not here”.

¹⁰ Cerebro is a tracking device engineered by Xavier and Magneto which enables Xavier to be telepathically connected to every mutant on Earth.

¹¹ Jack Zipes writes that “[t]here is a strong indication that the rise of a large number of mutants took place after World War II and might have something to do with the genetic experimentation that German scientists were conducting and that has been carried on by genetic scientists since that time” (Zipes 2006: 151).

¹² When Stryker recognizes Wolverine during the X-Mansion raid, he comments that the mutant has not “aged a day”. Pointing to his greying head, Stryker adds “Me, on the other hand...nature”, thus firmly establishing the mutants not only as inhuman, but also unnatural.

¹³ At this point it is perhaps worth invoking Hannah Arendt: “Not the loss of specific rights, then, but the loss of a community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever, has been the calamity which has befallen ever-increasing numbers of people. Man, it turns out, can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity” (Arendt 1973: 297).

¹⁴ “In remarks delivered at the White House in September 2001, President Bush declared of the 9/11 terrorist attacks: ‘This is a new kind of evil’ (Perez-Rivas, 2001). The president, perceiving the existing legal system as inadequate to counter the new, more ominous threats in a post-9/11 world, demanded an expansion of law enforcement powers. Procedural safeguards traditionally followed in criminal prosecutions were characterized as ‘soft’ approaches and cast aside in favor of a ‘crusade’ – a war that must be fought ‘in the shadows’ (Graham, 2004; Purdham, 2001; Shear, 2008). It took only five days after the 9/11 attacks for the Bush administration to frame the attacks on the United States as a cosmic battle of good vs. evil” (Deflem ed. 2010: 30).

¹⁵ This film, just like X2, opens with a voiceover from Charles Xavier describing the life on planet Earth in the shadow of Bolivar Trusk’s Sentinels, another exceptional measure deployed against the genetically deviant. As enslaved humans and mutants march together side by side, Xavier narrates: “The future. A dark, desolate world. A world of war, suffering, loss...on both sides. Mutants and the humans who dared to help them. Fighting an enemy we cannot defeat.” This kind of human-mutant solidarity is non-existent in X2.

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