

**Title:** “A Brain in a Vat, An Earth in a Bottle: Paranoiac Horror and the Latent Panopticism of Superman in *Red Son*”

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**Source:** *Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy*. No. 3 (2017): 65-89. Guest Eds.: Martin Simonson and Raúl Montero Gilete.

**Published by:** ULICES/CEAUL

**URL:** <http://messengersfromthestars.letas.ulisboa.pt/journal/archives/article/a-brain-in-a-vat-an-earth-in-a-bottle-paranoiac-horror-and-the-latent-panopticism-of-superman-in-red-son>



Snowflakes in the wind – Thomas Örn Karlsson

**A Brain in a Vat, An Earth in a Bottle: Paranoid Horror and the Latent  
Panopticism of Superman in *Red Son***

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**Abstract** | This paper will explore the paranoid horror elicited by anthropic science fiction superbeings, using DC Comics character Superman as a case study. In it, I argue that the character's power and Otherness have unavoidably dystopian consequences within the remit of the Many Earths of the DC Comics Multiverse. Referring primarily to Foucault's analysis of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, this paper explores the dystopian consequences of the combination of the invisibility afforded Superman by the character's triplicate identities (namely Kal-El, Clark Kent, and Superman respectively), and the omnipresence and omniscience the character's power and Otherness allow it. Using Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son* (2003) as a primary text, I will demonstrate how the most radical consequence of the combination of Superman's power and Otherness, and the ideological mediation of their deployment, produces a global panopticon overseen by a single superbeing. The goal here is to explore one possible reason for the unease and paranoia evinced by the idea of a superbeing on a diegetic representation of an earth that uses the disruptivity of its power and Otherness to discipline and punish human beings and,

furthermore, how Superman, as a type of super-subject, exacerbates a sense of confinement and constant surveillance in a system governed by idealized dialectical arrangements.

**Keywords** | Superman; *Red Son*; paranoia; panopticism; Foucault.



**Resumo** | Este artigo explora o horror paranóico provocado por super-seres antrópicos de ficção científica, recorrendo à personagem da DC Comics Super-Homem como caso de estudo. Neste artigo argumento que o poder e a alteridade da personagem têm inevitavelmente consequências distópicas dentro dos limites das Muitas Terras do Multiverso DC Comics. Recorrendo principalmente à análise de Foucault do panóptico de Jeremy Bentham, este artigo explora as consequências distópicas da combinação da invisibilidade assegurada ao Super-Homem pela identidade tripla da personagem (nomeadamente Kal-El, Clark Kent e Super-Homem, respectivamente) com a onnipresença e onisciência que o poder e alteridade da personagem lhe conferem. Fazendo uso de *Superman: Red Son* (2003) de Mark Millar como texto primário, demonstrarei como a consequência mais radical da combinação do poder e alteridade do Super-Homem, e a mediação ideológica da sua utilização, produz um panóptico global supervisionado por um único super-ser. O objetivo aqui é explorar uma razão possível para a inquietação e paranoia evidenciadas pela ideia de um super-ser numa representação diegética de uma Terra que faz uso da ruptura do seu poder e alteridade para disciplinar e punir seres humanos e, para além disso, como o Super-Homem, como um tipo de super-sujeito, agrava um sentido de isolamento e vigilância constante num sistema governado por acordos dialéticos idealizados.

**Palavras-chave** | Super-homem; *Red Son*; paranoia; panopticismo; Foucault.



### **Like Wings Over Elsinore: A Brief Outline of Superparanoia in Science Fiction and Comic Books**

It is not unreasonable to feel uncomfortable at the thought of the presence of a being like DC Comics' Superman on a diegetic earth that reflects hyperdiegetic sociopolitical, historical, and cultural realities. In *Fan Cultures* (2002), Matt Hills describes this third degree of meta – metadiegesis or hyperdiegesis as “the creation of vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nonetheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension” (137). As such, when I am talking about

Superman, I am always-already, unless otherwise specified, talking about Superman on the extradiegetic level, the diegetic level, and the hyperdiegetic level. The term extradiegetic refers to the world of the reader, the artist and the writer. The world of Siegel and Shuster, of Morrison, Moore, Ellis and Ennis. The world of you or I where, within our reality and its confines, Superman and its publication history are the result of ink and light on a page or screen that can be read semiologically. As such, simulacra or simulacral elements of the extradiegetic level are reproduced and represented in the diegetic level and, more specifically, in the narratives it sustains or creates. Perhaps the most famous example of this kind of inter-diegesis concerning Superman is found in *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* (1978) written by Dennis O'Neil and illustrated by Neal Adams. In this story, Superman and the heavyweight boxing champion work together to foil an alien invasion of that earth. What is important to note in this text is the composition of the attendees of the boxing match, which range from DC Comics artists, writers, and other comic book luminaries more generally, to various international celebrities, fictional characters from DC Comics and Mad Magazine, through to various internationally recognized literary, arts, sports and political figures. A more recent example of this kind of inter-diegesis can be found in *Action Comics* Vol. 2, No. 14 (January, 2013). In this story, extradiegetic cosmologist and science communicator Neil DeGrasse Tyson appears in a diegetic narrative, in which he determines that Superman's home planet, Krypton, once orbited the extradiegetic red dwarf LHS 2520 in the extradiegetic constellation Corvus, 27.1 light-years from our extradiegetic Earth. Tyson assisted the DC Comics editorial teams in helping them select an extradiegetic star that would be a suitable parent star to Krypton, selecting Corvus also in part due to its symbolic value – Corvus is Latin for “crow”, the crow being the mascot of the character's high school football team, the Smallville Crows.

Inter-diegesis forms the narrative and aesthetic loam for DC Comics' hyperdiegesis and is the reason behind the aesthetic, socio-political and historic-cultural resemblance between the diegetic world of Metropolis and the extradiegetic world of New York City, for example. The diegetic worlds of the DC Comics Multiverse reproduce a variety of versions of extradiegetic concepts and phenomena including presidents, floods, countries, baseball, corruption, wars, resources, love, planets, solar systems, universes and so on. The diegetic worlds are the worlds of the

characters, their thoughts and their actions. These are the worlds of Superman, Lois Lane, The Justice League, Gotham, The Watchtower and The Phantom Zone in which both radical power and Otherness appear represented by the superheroes and supervillains that both populate them and wield it therein. These diegetic worlds can, in turn, be reproduced and combined on another level or levels, which I refer to as the hyperdiegetic.

The hyperdiegetic can be best described as a story-within-a-story. For Superman, the DC Comics Multiverse itself, with its extensive array of worlds, universes, pocket dimensions and realms, is an example of hyperdiegesis. As with many aspects of the DC Multiverse, the number and nature of its infinite earths has undergone numerous revisions and additions. As noted in *The Multiversity Guidebook* Vol. 1, No. 1 (January, 2015) written by Grant Morrison and illustrated by various artists, including Ivan Reis, Nicola Scott, Gary Frank and Dan Jurgens, DC's current orrery of worlds and spheres include, but are not limited to, the following: Earths 0-51, Wonderworld (which exists beyond the Speed Force Wall), KWXYZZ (the so-called Radio Universe), Dream, Nightmare, Heaven, Hell, Skyland, Underworld, New Genesis, and Apokolips (which all exist beyond the Speed Force Wall in the Sphere of the Gods). Beyond these exist the Monitor Sphere, containing Nil. Furthermore, like the infinite degree of onto-existential and phenomenological variance that contemporary multiverse theorems propose, the DC Multiverse and its Elseworlds imprint offers variations of the basic narratological and aesthetic content of any given character. Examples include: post-Crisis Pocket Universe Superboy, post-Crisis The Qwardian, Antimatter Universe and Earth-3 Ultraman, post-Crisis Earth-4 Superman named Captain Allen Adam, Earth-10's Nazi controlled Superman named Overman and the Communist Superman appearing in Mark Millar, Dave Johnson, and Kilian Plunketts' *Superman: Red Son* (2003).

Before moving on to develop my analysis of Superman-as-Panopticon, I need to provide a brief description of another terminological decision brought to bear in the examination to follow. In addition, this essay will refer to Superman as "it". The convention of referring to Superman using the pronoun "he" already performs various kinds of reductive violence that I argue cannot be overlooked. It superimposes anthropocentric codes, qualities, and categories of being onto a being that genetically and philosophically represents the Other to them. Referring to Superman as "he" is an

equivocal inaccuracy. Grant Morrison and Rags Morales highlight this ontological and existential problem in “Superman In Chains” (December, 2012). While incarcerated and tortured under the command of General Sam Lane and Lex Luthor, Luthor insists on referring to Superman as “it”. Upon viewing the experiments Luthor and Lane are conducting on Superman’s body, which involve subjecting it to 30,000 volts at 10 amps in an electric chair in a chamber filled with Sarin gas, Dr Irons states that “torturing a man on U.S. soil, or anywhere else, is UNACCEPTABLE!” (Morrison n.pg.). Luthor, reminding Dr Irons that “he” is more accurately “it”, responds calmly, stating “those laws apply to HUMAN BEINGS, surely. [How can we] TORTURE a so-called man with STEEL-HARD skin and hair that can’t be cut?” (Morrison n.pg.).

I agree with Luthor. I argue that the terms superbeing or the third-person neuter pronoun “it” are the most accurate and basic terms with which to discuss any ontological or existential aspects of Superman. The fact that Superman is an alien stands as a first principle here. It is an extra-terrestrial creature that expresses many seemingly identical superficial traits to human beings that, however convincing, must not overlook the fact of Superman’s essential difference from anything and everything human. Furthermore, “he”, when considered fully, only accurately refers to one third of the personae “worn” by Superman/Kal-El, namely Clark Kent. I have privileged the use of the pronoun “it” in order to allow the being in question a greater degree of existential licence, which I argue better allows us to apprehend what it is or can be without violently inscribing anthropocentric privileging and its various agendas onto the power it possesses.

Superbeing-induced paranoiac horror is a recurrent theme in numerous works of science fiction. The concept of society-as-petri dish for example, in which a specific population or group or topological space with heterotopic qualities, as well as the attendant ideas of surveillance and paranoia exist, have been addressed in numerous works of fiction and science fiction. The petri-dish scenario can emerge as a direct result of a particular group’s agenda (not always human), advanced technology, or in heterotopic spaces such as dreams and virtual reality. Some particularly good examples include but are not limited to *Dark City* (1998), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *Existenz* (1999), *Inception* (2010), *The Signal* (2014), and *Miracleman* No. 21 (1991) written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by

Mark Buckingham. Throughout its history, the figure of the science fiction superman has acted as, amongst other things, a conceptual space through which writers and artists have addressed humanity's fear of domination and subjugation by an entity or entities both superior and fundamentally different from itself. The essence of these narratives is the question of what power is, who or what has access to it, and how it may be deployed, deterred, or distilled. In numerous human societies, diegetic or extradiegetic alike, the possession and expression of heightened and/or supernatural psycho-physical abilities is a mode of being that is consistently met with, amongst other things, fear. The presence of such a being is typically perceived and interpreted as either a radical questioning or a direct threat to the sovereignty and survival of the human race as the pre-eminent species on the diegetic earths that reflect the viewers'/readers' extradiegetic realities. The appearance of a new and undeniably supreme affective agent disrupts this history by de-centring and subsequently revaluing the pre-existing dynamics and hierarchies of power. Simply by being within the multifaceted structures that produce and reproduce a human being, the superbeing and its power disrupt the anthropocene and unbalance humanity's understanding of itself, setting everything within the affective range of its disruptivity into a state of flux in the same way that introducing a new apex predator into a foreign habitat can catalyse a radical destabilization, sometimes the total dissolution, of a pre-existing ecosystem.

The physical potency and seeming indomitability of a character like Superman constructs a paradigm in which the liberty to exist as it wills cannot be allowed. The typical reactionary response to science fiction superbeings decrees that "whether [the being] becomes an outcast, a pathetically lonely creature who is ostracized, or a tyrannical monster so dangerous that [it] threatens to enslave the world," it must be "either [eliminated] or robbed of [its] power" (Andrae 88 qtd. in Coogan). In this way, any human attempt to eradicate or neutralize the superbeing is ultimately an attempt to redress the power disequilibrium caused by the disruptivity of the superbeing being on a diegetic earth. Seeing that exhaustive profiles of the onto-existentialisms of these science fiction superbeings are often occluded in some way or other, this hypothesis does not rely on the maximal expression of said superbeings' power, or any total definition or understanding of what such a phenomena might be, or how it might manifest. By simply being superpowered on a diegetic earth in some way, and acting

as a superpowered entity, the disruptivity of the superbeing produces an inextricable link between the concepts of superiority, visibility, invisibility, horror and fear. Unlike the implicit danger of the science-heroes of 1960s and 1970s, American comic books like the re-imagined Flash and the Green Lantern, who notably championed a socio-political ethic that upheld the idea of a strong centralized government that represented a successful middle class, older characters like Superman still maintain the explicitness of their pre-war truculence and destructive aptitude. As Christopher Knowles notes in *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic book Heroes* (2007), “the new science heroes were proud servants of the military industrial complex” (Knowles 138), who by reversing the socio-political ethic of their 1940s forbears that championed a liberal Rooseveltian ideal by vilifying covetous corporate executives, attempted to dissemble the fact that the existence of creatures like Superman in diegetic worlds resembling the sociopolitical and historical reality of the reader carries with it latent paranoia and fear. While the emergent and re-imagined veteran heroes of this period could be described as obtuse, Knowles argues that these new interpretations of comic book superheroes offered readers two things lacking in American popular culture at the time, namely a positive and optimistic vision of society and, simultaneously, heroes worth emulating. This ostensibly also applies to Superman, however, beyond the iconic smile, the bright colour of its livery, and the elegance of its form, the salutes and waves, the flag billowing proudly behind the ur-god of the atomic age – all the iconography and symbolism that once acted as a protective screen shielding the consumer of Superman from the truth concerning the disruptivity of the type of being it represents – is the persistence of a fundamental anxiety about the figure of the comic book superbeing as a god in a cape.

I argue that the combination of Superman's power and Otherness is enough to diegetically induce global malaise, horror, and paranoia. Both of these irreducible aspects of the character invite pressing questions: what does it want? How does it view the diegetic representations of humanity? When and how is it looking into the diegetic representations of our lives? Is the character's agenda truly benevolent and altruistic? Being a powerful alien with no essential biological or socio-cultural responsibility to a diegetic earth or its people, what guarantee is there that it would not one day stop being a hero and become a conqueror? Similarly, Danny Fingeroth asks:

do superheroes provide an image of ‘friendly-fascism’? Is the very idea that they know when and how to do the right thing inherently instilling a misguided sense of dependence on authority in those who partake of these fantasies? Is a society that idealizes a Superman one that will fall prey to the myth of an Aryan Übermensch? (Fingeroth 21)

In response to Fingeroth, I argue that the sense of paranoiac horror and fascistic subtext inherent in the disruptivity of Superman’s power, body, and Otherness is not only expressed by the fact that the character is a super-powered agent of a particular ideological program predicated on a strict and narrow world view based on Judeo-Christian morals, but is also inherent in the *fact* of a being as powerful as Superman existing on a diegetic earth: one whose power and the range thereof also expresses a decidedly *penetrative* quality. Such considerations are made all the more demanding when one considers the comparative omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence the character’s power allows.

### **No Shadow in the Watchtower: Superman as Panopticon**

The incorporation of the term “Watchtower” here serves two prefatory purposes: first, as a reference to the central watchtower in the panopticon as described by Jeremy Bentham and secondly, the Watchtower is also the name of various bases of operation used by the Justice League of America, appearing in various media DC Comics hyperdiegesis. It is typically depicted as a large building comprised of nodes arranged in a circular formation around a central tower either situated on an earth’s moon, or as a space station in low earth orbit. The centre of power of Justice League functions, I argue, in much the same way as the centralizing power of Bentham’s panopticon’s central tower through the dialectic of visible/invisible.

The theme of the paranoiac horror caused by Superman’s presence on a diegetic earth is examined in depth in Mark Millar’s revisionary Elseworlds story *Superman: Red Son* (2003). The premise of *Red Son* is that Superman’s rocket crash-landed twelve hours later in Communist Russia instead of the Kansas wheat belt. Instead of growing up in the familiar setting of Smallville, the Superman of *Red Son* grows up on a communist collective farm in the Ukraine, Soviet Russia. The character grows to diligently serve all over that earth in the ways one typically expects of

Superman, namely preventing catastrophes, saving lives and so on. In this capacity, the character also acts as the upholder of Communist ideals, the champion of the common worker, Socialism, and the expansion of the Warsaw Pact under Joseph Stalin.

In *Red Son*, Millar conflates the underlying paranoid horror associated with Superman's power and Otherness (particularly its powers of observation), with McCarthyism, and the Second Red Scare of the Cold War. This paranoia can be noted in the opening scene of the text. In a national address, the U.S. president, modelled on John F. Kennedy, declares that the existence of "a costumed INDIVIDUAL more effective than [America's] HYDROGEN BOMB", whose "very EXISTENCE threatens to alter [America's] position as a world superpower FOREVER" is enough to initiate wide-spread paranoia and psychological terror (Millar 11). In other words, the existence of a being with "SUPER-HEARING: IMPENETRABLE SKIN: EYES THAT CAN SEE THROUGH WALLS and fire LASER BEAMS" disaffects America's standing as a preeminent democratic world superpower. The president underscores the pervasive sociopolitical, particularly militaristic, implications thereof stating, "the feds, the army and the C.I.A are all OFFICIALLY OBSOLETE" (Millar 11; 13).

Similarly, in an exchange with Lois Lane, Perry White vocalizes the resultant paranoid hysteria of the public disclosure of the existence of such a being, stating: "GREAT CAESAR'S GHOST! Superman spotted in DENVER! Superman sighted in NEBRASKA! Superman seen HOVERING OVER A FIELD in ARKANSAS! What the hell's GOING ON here, Lois? It's like the whole damn country's seeing RED CAPES under their beds" (Millar 12). From televised eyewitness accounts to personal conversations, Millar gives a cross-section of the type of paranoid malaise the mere existence of a being like Superman elicits in the general public. This is exemplified by a traumatized night-watchmen who states:

I was just coming OFF-DUTY when I saw a human-shaped FIGURE zip past me and then I heard LAUGHING up there in the clouds. They say he can see us from SPACE with those super-eyes of his and that he's watching our EVERY MOVE. Just biding his time for the PERFECT MOMENT to STRIKE. Rumour has it his bosses back in MOSCOW are pushing for a FULL-BLOWN INVASION in a matter of WEEK'S now. (Millar 12)

It is later revealed that Stalin is poisoned and subsequently dies. Shortly afterwards, an encounter with Lana Lazerenko (the Soviet version of Lana Lang, Superman's long-time canonical confidant and love interest) reveals to Superman that she, her children, and much of the Soviet population are victims of extreme privation. Spurred on by the basic needs of the people, Superman declares that it "COULD take care of everyone's problems if [it] ran this place, [and finding] no good reason [not to]" and subsequently succeeds Stalin to become Premier of the Soviet Union (Millar 54). It is later revealed that under Superman's supreme control of not only the Soviet Union, but also of its allies under the Warsaw Pact:

the Soviet Union was just a FRAGILE ASSEMBLY when Superman first came to power. TWO DECADES LATER AND THE WHOLE WORLD is [its] ally. Only the UNITED STATES and CHILE choose to remain independent: The last two Capitalist Economies on Earth and both on the brink of fiscal and social COLLAPSE. The rest of the world was GLAD to volunteer total control to Superman and watched in awe as [it] rebuilt their societies, running their affairs more efficiently than any HUMAN could. POVERTY, DISEASE and IGNORANCE have been VIRTUALLY ELIMINATED from WARSAW PACT STATES...DISOBEDIENCE to the PARTY has been VIRTUALLY ELIMINATED. (Millar 62-3)

After jointly thwarting Batmankov's (the Soviet version of Batman) plot to assassinate Superman, Wonder Woman (Superman's closest and most steadfast ally) is left de-powered in a catatonic state. Following this incident, Superman's views on power, the people, and their control are radicalized whereby the character's influence on the fate of *Red Son's* Earth-30 and its people becomes more direct and extreme. Superman confesses that:

barely any decision was made across the length and breadth of the Soviet Union without my permission in SOME form or another. The population was largely GRATEFUL and OBEDIENT but the freedom fighters, inspired by the death of Batman, remained something of a PROBLEM. My desire for ORDER AND PERFECTION was matched only by their dreams of VIOLENCE AND CHAOS. I offered them UTOPIA, but they fought for the right to live in HELL. (Millar 101)

What is most important here is precisely *how* Superman maintains discipline and control in its global regime. It is revealed by the re-programmed Brainiac, one of Superman's most dangerous and longstanding canonical enemies, that Superman

maintains obedience through “a steady hand and some pioneering neurosurgery [through which] even the most persistent trouble-makers can become productive workers”, going on to state that “if [Brainiac’s] OWN *rehabilitation* isn’t proof enough, surely [Superman’s] other former enemies cleaning toilets in Bombay is a tribute to the success of [Superman’s] initiatives” (Millar 108). In effect, Superman uses coercive and horrific neurological technology – depicted as a type of lobotomization – to turn dissidents and enemies into productive, albeit Will-less, drones with eerie smiles and execrably jovial dispositions. Under the aegis of this regime, it is revealed that at the beginning of the last third of the narrative:

the world now contained almost six billion communists [where] Moscow tick-tocked with the same Swiss precision as every other town and city in [its] global Soviet Union. Every adult had a job. Every child had a hobby and the entire human population enjoyed the full eight hours sleep which their bodies required. Crime didn’t exist. Accidents never happened. It didn’t even rain unless Brainiac was absolutely certain that everyone was carrying an umbrella. Almost six billion citizens and hardly anyone complained. *Even in private.* (Millar 106-7, italics mine)

What is most important in considering the paranoid horror caused by Superman’s power here is how Millar addresses the consequences of the character using said power in a singularly totalizing manner by allowing its disruptivity to be assimilated into institutionalized technologies of power. In so doing, the disruptivity of Superman’s power and Otherness becomes the physical *embodiment* of the panopticon as analysed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977). I argue that the paranoid horror of the character’s existence and activity on a diegetic earth is predicated on the fact that the penetrative nature of its being disrupts the seeing/being seen dyad in a radical way. Due to the combination of the character’s power and its ability to sublimate its Otherness in the uncanniness of its body, Superman can operate with immunity both visibly and invisibly. *Red Son* emphasizes the importance of the fact that though Superman may dedicate its powers toward ostensibly humanistic teloi, the oppressively panoptic aspects of the character’s powers cannot be nullified by the so-called benevolence of the way in which they are used.

In order to understand the panopticism of Superman’s power and Otherness, let me first define what a panopticon is. The panopticon is a type of building designed

by English social theorist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. It consists of a circular structure arranged around an observation or inspection tower at its centre. From within the tower, a single observer is able to watch the inmates, who are assigned to individual cells arranged around the perimeter, without being observed in turn. The underlying premise of the panopticon's design in this way is to turn visibility itself into a trap or enclosure that sustains a particular type of power relation. As Foucault describes:

Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. Another primary effect of the design of the Panopticon is that the inmates themselves are unable to tell whether or not they are being observed at any given time. (201)

Without the aid of recording and surveillance technology, it would be physically impossible for a single human supervisor to simultaneously observe all inmates in every cell. However, the fact that the inmates cannot definitively know how and when they are being observed produces an effect whereby all inmates behave as if they are being watched at all times, effectively surveilling and controlling their own behaviour constantly. Bentham describes this phenomenon of self-surveillance as the idea of the inspection principle. As such, the panopticon is a biopowered mechanism for producing "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind" that automatizes and disindividualizes power; or as Foucault describes:

the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Bentham n.pg.; Foucault 201)

The design of the panopticon emphasizes a dialectic of visibility/invisibility which reverses the principle and three primary functions of the dungeon, namely to hide,

enclose, and deprive of light. This design is so effective that it presents polyvalent applications. This means that:

it does not matter what motive animates [the watchman]: the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing [...] The Panopticon is a marvellous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power. A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. (Foucault 203)

As a result, such a design and the concept of its functioning can be applied to any institution that employs surveillance as a method of discipline and punishment, including prisons, day-cares, asylums, schools, hospitals, and sanatoriums. Foucault states that:

the arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes on him an axial visibility; but the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility. And this invisibility is a guarantee of order. If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences; if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion; if they are madmen there is no risk of their committing violence upon one another; if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time; if they are workers, there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect or cause accidents. The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities. From the point of view of the guardian, it is replaced by a multiplicity that can be numbered and supervised. (202)

The panopticon describes a material technology of disciplinary power predicated on the opposition between the visible and the invisible. This tension is practised, maintained, and situated primarily in an architectural, inanimate construction. The panoptic structure is first a building before it subsequently becomes a psychological structure and means of exerting the power of psychological discipline, punishment, and control. Unlike Bentham's panopticon, which functions by individualizing those interred therein by subjecting them to a disindividualized form of (?) power, Superman is *radically* individual, in terms of both power and

Otherness. I argue that the combination of Superman's powers of surveillance and its actions as a corrective moral agent, whose function as a superhero is to discipline and punish aberrant, unlawful, and "bad" behaviour, *embodies* this type of panoptic power. Though the character claims "truth" and "justice" as the teloi of its actions, Superman's power ultimately produces horrifically homogenous effects regardless of the reason behind exercising its power. For the sceptic, moral relativist, or horrified/paranoid individual, Superman's powers of surveillance could very well be motivated by an the indiscreet voyeurism of a stranger in a strange land, the malice of a being who does not belong anywhere completely, a being's thirst for knowledge about a species entirely other yet uncannily similar to itself, or simply the pleasure of exercising its power over inferior creatures by playing the role of a god amongst mortals.

*Red Son* suggests that the panoptic principle used to monitor, discipline, and reproduce docile bodies is not only inherent in Superman's power, but also embodied by it. The combination of the character's protean onto-existential Otherness and its radical power provide it with total panoptic access to human beings. Its X-Ray vision and super-hearing allow Superman an absolute purview over humanity in the same way that the occupant of the central observation tower of Bentham's panopticon possesses. While Bentham's panopticon is an architectural configuration of forces in such a way that one supervisor may observe, discipline, and control hundreds of madmen, patients, workers, pupils, or the condemned, Superman's observational powers represent the radical embodiment, expansion, and *refinement* of the same coercive apparatus because through Superman's powers, this principle is applicable to a diegetic representation of an entire human race. Unlike the inanimate and static panoptic structure bound to a single locale that can be torn down, Superman is not only radically mobile, but also radically invulnerable. As such, the panopticism of Superman's disruptivity becomes a mirror of the type of power it simultaneously makes redundant. In this sense, both Superman's disruptivity and the panopticon serve as signs for one another that reflect the same concept of the idealization of power. Both present "a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction" (Foucault 205). As such, I argue that Superman's Other version of power does not *change* anything because its

ideological principle remains the same: to control, subjugate, discipline, and punish lives and bodies. Consider the following cover image:



Figure 1. Taken from *Superman: Red Son* Vol. 1, No. 3 “Red Son Setting” (August 2003) written by Mark Millar, illustrated by Dave Johnson.

Johnson’s depiction of Superman makes the theme of surveillance and its subsequent paranoid horror clear. The image centralizes the penetrative nature of Superman’s Gaze by emphasizing its glowing eyes that not only meet and follow the reader’s gaze, but are also known to be able to see *through* it. The notion of absolute penetration is underscored by the image’s accompanying text because in *Red Son*, Superman is not watching what one typically construes as threats to one’s personal liberty in the form of the subjective violence of criminals and villains. Instead, Superman’s powers of surveillance are dedicated to the monitoring and control of the *general* public. Johnson’s aesthetic – from the composition of Superman’s face, the stark tricolour palette, the centralized Gaze, and the accompanying text buttressing the

theme of surveillance – recalls Winston Smith’s description of a poster of Big Brother on the first page of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Winston states, “on each landing, opposite the lift shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran” (Orwell 3).

What is one to conclude from Superman being viewed as an embodied panopticon? For one thing, there is a radical *economy* in the character’s panopticism, one that the economy of a traditional panopticon cannot match. The traditional panopticon reduces the efficacy of its functioning to purely architectural, optical, and geometric arrangements. In contrast, Superman is able to travel at super-sonic and subluminal speeds, to hear clearly, and discreetly, over immense distances. The character is also able to see *through* any substance (save lead) to the electromagnetic and even the atomic level. In *Superman: Birthright* (2003), Mark Waid even posits that Superman is able to see the “aura” surrounding all living things that dissipates and disappears at the moment of death, described as a type of “soul vision” (Waid 3; 22). The theme of Superman’s penetrative Gaze is inadvertently taken up in *Action Comics* Vol. 2, No. 1 “Superman Versus the City of Tomorrow” written by Grant Morrison, illustrated by Rags Morales. In the story, detective Blake, his officers, and a squad of tactical personal attempt to arrest Superman, resulting in a momentary stand-off. Superman uses its X-Ray vision to look *inside* Blake’s stomach, flippantly cautioning, “you need to call your doctor about that ULCER, detective Blake. I can see it throbbing fit to BURST from here” (Morrison n.pg.). This scene further highlights the invasive nature of the character’s Gaze as well as the fact that with the possession of these powers of surveillance, Superman’s presence is *always* possible both on the smallest and largest levels of being. The character’s ability to see into one’s heart, veins, brain, or stomach, and based on where and who one is with, allows it to synthesize this data in such a way as to have accurate and penetrating insights into one’s life, health, habits, vices, weaknesses and so on. In view of the radical extent of Superman’s panoptic Gaze, there can be no privacy because one would never definitively know when one was being watched or how one was being watched by it. As such, Superman’s powers of observation contain a panopticism, willed or not, benevolent or not, that is as irreducible to its being as its Otherness or power.

When compared to the architectural panopticon, the disruptivity of Superman’s power, body, and Otherness make its panopticism more efficient in every way.



Figure 2. Taken from *Superman: Red Son* Vol. 1, No. 3 “Red Son Setting” (August 2003) written by Mark Millar, illustrated by Dave Johnson.

Consider Figure 2 Johnson’s depiction of Superman concretizes the concept of Superman as an embodied panopticon as I have described it. From this image, one can conclude that Superman’s Gaze is not theoretical or static in *Red Son*. Johnson’s composition emphasizes the notion of Superman as a dominator. This is achieved through suggestive composition, a visual pun, specifically the placement of the satellite subtending the upper left part of Earth-30’s circumference. This placement has the effect of alluding to the idea that Superman, while standing on the satellite, is simultaneously standing on Earth-30 itself. This visual pun is complimented by

Johnson's use of the green areas, which ostensibly refer to Superman's concerted projects of reforestation and the reification of other similar solutions to various ecocritical concerns. While these areas resemble the symbolic demarcations of colonial jurisdictions, they also resemble the papules and macules of a rash, as if to suggest that Superman is the vector of a foreign, viral, and malevolent Kryptonian influence (further compounded by the shade of Kryptonite green used, a colour synonymous with poison in the character's *mythos*). Furthermore, Superman is shown to use its powers of surveillance to turn Earth-30, and all life therein, *into an object of observation*. While the character may use satellites and other devices like the reprogrammed Brainiac to collate and store data, as the image shows, Superman's Gaze is panoptic and embodied because the character does not *require* any technological means of surveillance in order to exercise its Gaze and deploy its perspective to oversee the entire planet. The above image effectively depicts how the panoptic efficacy of the gaze of the watchman in Bentham's panoptic tower is exploded, perfected, and embodied in Superman. Unlike the watchmen in the tower who can only observe cross-sections of a populace at a time, Superman can simultaneously and consistently observe everyone everywhere, watchmen and observed alike. Regardless of however objectionable one may find such a realization, I argue that it is *precisely* the panopticism of its power that also facilitates its actions as a superhero. Through its powers of surveillance, Superman is able to perceive danger, hear, smell, see, and taste, for example, a fire, a mugging or an earthquake, in such a way that allows it to react decisively in allaying said dangers and, in some instances, in pre-empting said dangers. However, the character's surveillance abilities are reducible to the same principles of panopticism and material praxes of totalizing power inherent in Bentham's panopticon. As such, Superman's seeing *into* danger is inextricable from seeing *into* the lives and beings of those at risk of said danger. In this way, the paranoiac horror haunting Superman's omniscience and omnipresence is indivisible from the character's power and its activity as a superhero, whose task, ironically, is to allay fears, threats, and danger.

While humanity for the supervisor in a panoptic tower is *visible*, humanity for a superbeing in possession of Superman's powers of surveillance becomes *transparent*. Like the panopticon's second principle of power, namely the invisibility or unverifiability of the observer, Superman is able to dissimulate its power through

the aesthetic apparatus known as Clark Kent that allows the character to disappear amid the terrestrial and human *milieu*. By “storing” its power in, underneath, beside, or behind Clark, humanity can never unequivocally know when or how they are being observed. Its fractured identity makes verification of this power, its localization in a single, clear identity, impossible. The fragmentation inherent in Superman’s ‘tridentity’, namely being simultaneously but never fully either “Kal-El”/“Superman”/“Clark Kent”, becomes a means of “dissociating the see/being seen dyad” whereby being Superman/Clark means that the superbeing can see totally without being totally seen in turn (Foucault 202).

As such, a pervasive paranoiac horror is always-already at play in any and all narratives involving Superman on a diegetic representation of an extradiegetic terrestrial reality. This horror is latently emergent as the human beings of said narratives cannot solely take succour in the fact that they feel they are potentially always being observed, not just by the State, but by Superman as the Eye of the State; one that is always threatening to spy out transgressions and express itself so as to correct, discipline, and punish such deviations from the morally and ethically determined norm as the Fist of the State. As such, Superman is, like Bentham’s panoptic structure, both actively (as Superman) and passively (as Clark Kent) involved in the observational penetration and administration of bodies and lives. In this way, being Clark Kent or Superman does not matter because the panoptic principle and the power of its functioning works both through presence *and* absence. Human beings cannot verify when this extra-terrestrial power is being exerted, where, how, for whom, against whom, or truly why it is being exercised as it is at all. All diegetic humanity has to go on is Superman’s word and the values the character endorses. While the character’s credo of “truth, justice, and the American Way” may be enough to appease a portion of the diegetic populace, I argue that the point is not the ways Millar shows Superman’s Soviet self to be different from its conservative jingoistic self in *Red Son*, but rather the ways in which they are the *same*.

## **Superpanopticism & Kryptocolonialism, by Any Other Name: Superman as Repressive Onto-Existential Agent**

The numerous Elseworlds stories featuring Superman present the character in alternate diegetic realities, times, and worlds by re-imagining the most basic and familiar aspects of the character's aesthetic and narratological content. These narratives typically elicit a sense of novel excitement, yet mostly do not offer anything radically new and, instead, read as recapitulations of longstanding ideas. For example, John Byrne's *Action Comics Annual Vol. 1, No. 6: "Legacy"* (January, 1994) and *Superman: A Nation Divided* (1998) written by Roger Stern, illustrated by Eduardo Barreto, show Superman participating in the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars. In *Superman: Kal* (1995) written by Dave Gibbons, illustrated by José Luis García-López, Superman's spacecraft crash-lands in Medieval England, where the character grows to become a blacksmith, forging the future Excalibur and a special suit of armour from the wreckage of its ship. In *Superman's Metropolis* (1997) written by Jean-Marc Lofficier, illustrated by Ted McKeever, Superman fights against Futura, disguised as Lois Lane, in Fritz Lang's German Expressionist Metropolis. *Superman/Wonder Woman: Whom Gods Destroy* (1997) written by Chris Claremont, illustrated by Dusty Abell sees Superman and Wonder Woman fight against Nazis and Greek gods in an alternate future. In *Superman: War of the Worlds* (1999) written by Roy Thomas, illustrated by Michael Lark, a 1940s inspired re-incarnation of the character encounters and defeats H.G. Wells' Martian invaders from *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Ultimately, it does not matter how aesthetically or narratologically disparate the Supermen of the DC hyperdiegesis may be, be they socialist, jingoistic, or Nazi. "Truth" and "justice" cannot extenuate the fact that the idea of Superman is used as an ideological tool, weapon, and icon of the praxis of the superpowered administration of human lives and human bodies, in the last instance. As such, Superman, as a panoptic moral enforcer, becomes a potentially amenable strategy of human biopower as an alien technology of biopower. The idea that an extremely powerful alien exists in and amongst human beings, watching them, affecting them both visibility and invisibly, produces an effect of panoptic paranoid horror in human beings on an earth whereby:

he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes principle of his own subjugation. (Foucault 203)

While in *Superman/Batman* Vol. 1, No. 3, Batman notes that: “it is a remarkable dichotomy. In many ways, Clark is the most human of us all. Then...he shoots fire from the skies, and it is difficult not to think of his as a god. And how fortunate we all are that it does not occur to him”, *Red Son* highlights the consequences of this realization in Superman (Loeb n.pg.). With Superman on a diegetic earth, there is *something* in the tower watching us, looking *through* us, and this something is like a god. Millar’s narrative in *Red Son* makes explicit that the concept of humanity for Superman ultimately becomes an object of information, never a collective of subjects in communication whereby our inescapable visibility becomes a trap. In this way, “from the point of view of [Superman], [human being] is replaced by a multiplicity that can be numbered and supervised” (Foucault 201). This panoptic paranoid horror implicitly exposes the siege efficacy of the character’s ostensible benevolence, producing an atmosphere in which Superman acts as a lone watchman in what now feels like not only a decidedly penitential Metropolis, but also a bottled earth. In this sense, the so-called “City of Tomorrow” becomes indistinguishable from the perfect prison of yesteryear.

While the panopticism of the character’s power and Otherness produces a fear of Superman’s ability to observe and catalogue the human species, inherent in this fear is also the concern that Superman has the power to turn an earth and all life therein into its own petri dish/experimental space. Ultimately, *Red Son* suggests that human agency is not applicable or actionable at Superman’s level of being. As such, Superman’s disruptivity can be used as a total and devastating effect of biopower through which the concept of “the world” and human being can be miniaturized, remade, and controlled. *Red Son* also speaks to the fear that with Superman, there is always the unsuppressed possibility that observation will become direct participation whereby the Earth becomes its laboratory of power; a:

machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals. To experiment with machines [and various other apparatuses of

control] and monitor their effects. To try out [alterations in being], to seek out the most effective ones. To teach different techniques simultaneously to [beings], to decide which is the best. To try out pedagogical experiments [...] One could bring up different children according to different systems of thought, making certain children believe that two and two do not make four or that the moon is a cheese, then put them together when they are twenty or twenty-five years old; one would then have discussions that would be worth a great deal more than the sermons or lectures on which so much money is spent; one would have at least an opportunity of making discoveries in the domain of metaphysics. (Foucault 204)

This theme can be noted in *Superman* Vol. 1, No. 174, “The End of a Hero Part II” written by Edmond Hamilton, illustrated by Al Plastino. In this pre-*Crisis* story, Superman “plays God” in the Frankensteinian mode when it takes to its Fortress of Solitude and creates “a synthetic android,” replete with “artificial nerves”, that can think and feel, possess a mind, with consciousness and emotions and a “conscience factor” (Hamilton 5-6). In disregarding the codes and procedures governing such radical creativity, Superman “carries out whatever scientific experiments [it] wants, without regard for any ethical committees” due to the immunity its power and Otherness allow (Lloyd 190).

### **Conclusion: An Earth in a Jar**

In view of the above analysis, I cannot help but conclude that Superman’s panopticism miniaturizes human being in its dialectical approach and appraisal thereof – as either good or evil – in the same way Brainiac does Kandor. This theme of miniaturizing is used as a metaphor to describe the scales of power and the panoptic application of an omniscient Gaze against an entire population in *Red Son* No. 3. In one notable scene, Luthor pens a letter he knows Superman, with its panoptic Gaze, will be able to read. The letter states: “why don’t you just put the whole world in a BOTTLE, Superman?” (Millar 136). Superman’s active enforcement of human ideology, which is tantamount to the lobotomization of dissident elements of the human populace, in order to establish a top-down utopia in the denizens it literally and invasively controls incites the resistance of Lex Luthor’s amoral genius. Luthor’s active resistance against the dystopian autocracy inherent in the panopticism of Superman’s power and Otherness troubles the dialectical

arrangement of hero (Superman) vs. villain (Luthor). Luthor's letter is important because the only way to resist the adverse effects of both Superman's panopticism and its punitive use is to present the fact thereof in a way that transgresses any deferring capabilities Superman's naiveté or ideological interpellation may facilitate. Luthor's caustically insightful letter is shown to be more effective than any weapon because it uses Superman's penetrative Gaze as a mirror against itself through which Superman cannot help but recognize the fear and oppression its paradoxical existence as an alien moral champion/overseer on Earth-30 produces. As such, Luthor's seemingly simple letter creates a monumental psychic break within Superman by uncovering the *aporia* of Superman, having always-already changed an earth by being in it, and yet using the disruptivity of its power and Otherness to preserve an idealized version thereof. After reading the letter, Superman breaks down, stating "OH MY GOD! What have I DONE? All I wanted was to put an end to all the WARS and FAMINES! I only wanted the BEST for everyone, you've got to BELIEVE me... [...] I'm just as bad as YOU were Brainiac. I'm just another alien bullying a less developed species and it's MORALLY UNJUSTIFIABLE" (Millar 136-7). As such, *Red Son* presents the rivalry between Superman and the character's nemesis Luthor in a way that is less about the conflict between communism and capitalism. While the clash of these two ideologies is embodied by Superman and Luthor – the former becoming premier of the Soviet Union, the latter subsequently becoming the president of the United States – who form the narratological and aesthetic grounding of the story, Millar's text ultimately presents this antagonism as a human being's resistance against the horror of the panoptic power of a superbeing acting as overseer and oligarch of an earth.



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