

“My Side of the Line”

The Punisher and Vigilante Violence in Contemporary America

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ON JANUARY 6TH, 2021, thousands of Donald Trump supporters stormed the Capitol Building where Congress was beginning the electoral vote count. Five deaths and well over a hundred injuries to Capitol Police Officers, among others, were the result.¹ Even before this unprecedented show of vigilante violence, Americans had suffered a string of mass shootings dating back several years. CBS News reported that 417 mass shootings took place in 2019, noting that this number surpasses the number of days in a single year, and this heartbreaking trend continues.² If, as Rand Richard Cooper astutely argues in “Devilish Adaptations,” cinematic and televised representations of superheroes “offer us a view of our collective self, revealing the underlying urgencies of the moment,” how do we now assess antiheroes such as the Punisher who take the law into their own hands and seek “justice” at the smoking muzzle of a gun?

1 Duignan, Brian. “United States Capitol attack of 2021.” *Britannica*, 2021, www.britannica.com/event/United-States-Capitol-attack-of-2021. Accessed 1 February 2021.

2 Silverstein, Jason. “There were more mass shootings than days in 2019.” *CBS News*, 2020, www.cbsnews.com/news/mass-shootings-2019-more-than-days-365. Accessed 7 December 2020.

For Cooper, the 2004 *Punisher* film, directed by Jonathan Hensleigh and starring Thomas Jane as Frank Castle, aka the “Punisher,” comments on the War on Terror that began shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, with the Punisher as “a Special Forces veteran” who “takes brutal action to punish ‘the evildoers’ for spilling innocent American blood”; as the Punisher states, “Those who do evil to others... will come to know me well.”³ Here a clear definition of “evil” is put forth in evoking the terrorist attacks of 9/11, but superheroes also diachronically function to emphasize changing cultural concerns and shifting definitions of “evil.” Throughout his now forty-seven-year career that has included “11 ongoing series, 25 limited series, 33 one-shot titles, 11 crossover events and several standalone graphic novels... feature-length movies and shorts... video games... animated television programs and films... and endless licensed products, from socks, hats and t-shirts to action figures,” the Punisher has emblemized not only American military might, but also the vigilante cinema of the 1970s, and the

3 Cooper, Rand Richards. “Devilish Adaptations: *The Punisher and Hellboy*.” *Commonweal*, vol. 131, no. 10, 21 May 2004, pp. 19-20.

concept of the antihero who seeks to do “good” but in a manner that all too well reflects the evil of recent mob violence and mass shootings.⁴

Created by Gerry Conway, who states that his “idea of the Punisher was that he was a guy who was driven by his need for vengeance but was not so driven that he couldn’t see what was going on around him,” the character first appears in a story entitled “The Punisher Strikes Twice!” in *The Amazing Spider-Man* Number 129 (February, 1974) where he foils Spider-Man. In that story, the Punisher’s permanent solution, of killing criminals whom he deems guilty, is opposed to Spidey’s practice of remanding them to police custody, only to escape to fight our friendly neighborhood web-head once again.⁵ Renowned comics scholar Peter Coogan argues for the manner in which a character’s costume reflects their mission and identity, and Kent Worcester, in “The Punisher: Marvel Universe icon and murderous antihero,” comments upon the manner in which the Punisher’s costume mirrors his insistence that in permanently putting down criminals he is simply doing what has to be done: “The character’s morbid outfit—black Kevlar bodysuit, ammunition belt, oversized skull-face emblem, white gloves and boots—underscored the binary nature of his thinking and implicitly disdained the snazzier-clothing styles favored by Spidey and others.”⁶ Even the Punisher’s name, “Frank Castle,” speaks to an immutable binary, an impervious fortress of determination.

Worcester argues for the significance of the Punisher’s 1974 introduction as a form

4 Worcester, Kent. “The Punisher: Marvel Universe icon and murderous antihero.” *Antihero*, edited by Rebecca Stewart. Intellect, 2016, pp. 35.

5 DiPaolo, Marc. *War, Politics, and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*. McFarland, 2011.

6 Worcester, pp. 36-37.

Worcester notes that the Punisher, unlike previous cinematic vigilante characters such as Dirty Harry, “derives pleasure from killing... despite his protestations.”

of escapism, occurring at a time when American culture embraced “the crusading vigilante [who] was flourishing on the movie screen” in such films as *Billy Jack* and *Dirty Harry* (both 1971), and *Death Wish* (1974), as a reflection of “the bitter impact of the Vietnam War on service personnel, their families and their local communities, as well as the larger crime rates of the 1970s.”⁷ Such commentary places the vigilante if not in a sympathetic light, then at least in an optic of anti-war critique. By comparison, Marc DiPaolo shifts focus away from the Vietnam conflict, but adds further political gloss to Worcester’s argument in *War, Politics, and Superheroes*, when he states that the Punisher represents the fears of the New Right in the late 1970s and early 1980s that a liberal permissive establishment were too soft on crime. DiPaolo defines *Dirty Harry* as: “A reflection of the grim mood gripping the nation... Enraged with an incompetent mayor and cadre of officials who seem unable to do anything... Dirty Harry goes rogue... frees the children, and summarily executes [their kidnapper] with his impressive .44 Magnum.”⁸ Again, the vigilante emerges from DiPaolo’s analysis of *Dirty Harry* as an escapist figure; a vicarious realization of “justice” where established

7 Worcester, p. 36.

8 DiPaolo, p. 122.

forms of law enforcement fail. Greg Garrett identifies the failure of established forms of law enforcement as key to the definition of a “vigilante”: “the word... first came into usage in English in America in the mid-nineteenth century to describe ‘a member of a self-appointed group of citizens who undertake law enforcement in their community without legal authority, typically because the legal agencies are thought to be inadequate.’”⁹ By this definition, heroic and inspirational characters such as Batman and Spider-Man, among many others, are all vigilantes, but, on the other hand, so are the vigilantes who comprised the mob that stormed the Capitol, and the Punisher seems closer in his methodology to these real-life vigilantes.

Speaking to the ideology of intolerance that led to the attack on the Capitol, DiPaolo notes that, “The Punisher reflects and amplifies the tendencies of conservative readers to, in a racist fashion, scapegoat entire groups for the problems of society without thinking of meaningful ways of dealing with poverty and crime,” This idea is well-expressed in episode one, season two of Netflix’s *Daredevil*, entitled “Bang,” in which the Punisher (Jon Bernthal) slaughters a group of stereotypical Mafiosi.¹⁰ In a scene that pays homage to Garth Ennis’s gritty, ultraviolent approach to writing the character for Marvel Comics, bullets rip through the window of the room where the Mafiosi have gathered and tear them to pieces in slow motion. Notably, the Punisher’s primary targets consist of Italian-Americans, Black, and Latinx characters, groups, as DiPaolo argues, that have traditionally been blamed by racist individuals as the cause of crime and urban

decline in America’s inner cities. In the “Whirlwind” episode that concludes the second season of *The Punisher* on Netflix, the Punisher walks calmly into a meeting between two gangs composed of primarily Black members. When his presence is noticed, he sweeps back his coat to raise two fully automatic rifles. The final image is of Frank screaming with rage (and perhaps glee) as he unloads both rifles, the Punisher skull logo illuminated by muzzle flare. Although such a moment is an obvious appeal to fandom—in concluding not only the season but also the series with an iconic pose which engages Liam Burke’s definition of “fidelity” as a comic book film adaptation remaining faithful to its source—it simultaneously informs DiPaolo’s reading of the character as a “racial purist” whose approach to crime represents a “white-supremacist, wish-fulfillment fantasy” that fails dialogue about “thinking about how to fix the problems of the decaying inner cities in America.”¹¹

The primary point of dialogue surrounding the Punisher, then, and one that does classify him more as an antihero than a superhero, is his willingness to resort, unlike Batman or Spider-Man, to a permanent solution in killing those he deems criminals, the majority of whom, moreover, are minorities. Consider that as of 2016 Worcester attributes a staggering body count of approximately 48,000 to the character across his numerous iterations.¹² As both progeny and prodigy of the vigilante films in which one man’s action becomes necessary because of a failure in society, Worcester nevertheless notes that the Punisher, unlike previous cinematic vigilante characters such as Dirty Harry, “derives pleasure from killing... despite his protestations.”¹³ He concludes that, “The

9 Garrett, Greg. *Holy Superheroes: Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Film* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 67.

10 DiPaolo, p. 135.

11 DiPaolo, pp. 135-136.

12 Worcester, p. 35.

13 Worcester, p. 41.

Punisher's open-ended war on crime provides a template for what *should never be allowed to happen*," a point that DiPaolo also acknowledges: "the Punisher may be read as a morality tale warning against the spiritual emptiness, never-ending horizons, and perpetually escalating cycle of violence that ensues when the thirst for vengeance overtakes the need for justice."¹⁴ Even though we might vicariously understand the appeal of vigilantes such as Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson) in 2008's *Taken*, after all "who would not go to extreme lengths to protect one's family?," characters such as the Punisher become problematic "after the family member in question has been rescued or avenged, and the angry white male protagonist continues to wage an indiscriminate war on crime with the same savage intensity he had employed while out to avenge a wronged family member."¹⁵

Worcester and DiPaolo raise important questions in light of Cooper's assertion that superheroes provide a palimpsest for a collective cultural self. In "Le Western Noir': *The Punisher* as Revisionist Superhero Western," Lorrie Palmer further argues for a collective self that longs to see and experience "both darkness and light in our heroes."¹⁶ In so doing, Palmer seeks to mitigate the Punisher's heart of darkness by balancing it against the belief that "family is about sanctuary and... provides a human element to the nearly machine-like Frank Castle."¹⁷ Levi-Strauss argues that the fundamental dichotomy in human society is civilization versus wilderness, and from this Palmer derives a series of oppositions such as good versus evil, or the Punisher's

solitary violence in contrast to the redemptive power of his family.

The Punisher might then be read as a character divided between two power systems and who thus must navigate shifting dynamics of male power.¹⁸ Though speaking explicitly to the 2004 Thomas Jane film, Palmer's commentary concerning the mitigating influence of family on the Punisher applies well to characters in both Netflix's *Daredevil* and *The Punisher*. Though Frank makes alliances with characters such as Curtis Hoyle and David "Microchip" Lieberman in *The Punisher*, here I have chosen to focus upon Karen Page as representative, due to her presence in both the *Daredevil* and *Punisher* series.

Karen (Deborah Ann Wohl) meets Frank in season two of *Daredevil*, and she views him not as a machine-like killer, but rather as a veteran suffering from the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This presentation of Frank agrees with DiPaolo's argument that the true origin of the Punisher lies not with the murder of Frank's family, but rather with overseas American military action. While the comic books, such as those penned by Ennis, do position Frank in Vietnam, both *Daredevil* and the two seasons of *The Punisher*, as well as the 2004 film, retcon the character as a veteran of American military action in the Middle East. Such an approach does introduce into the Punisher origin story the possibility that the character, rather than embracing his own heart of darkness, suffers from PTSD: "Even though most veterans did not return to witness their families killed by the Mafia, many did effectively lose their families to the war. They found themselves unable to reconcile the events they had witnessed... with a placid domestic life."¹⁹

14 Worcester, p. 42; DiPaolo, p. 128.

15 DiPaolo, p. 125.

16 Palmer, Lorrie. "Le Western Noir': *The Punisher* as Revisionist Superhero Western." *The Amazing Transforming Superhero*, edited by Terrence R. Wandtke, McFarland, 2007, p. 192.

17 Palmer, p. 199.

18 Palmer, p. 194.

19 DiPaolo, pp. 117-118.

Instead of the Punisher confronting an enemy who, he deems, needs to be killed, for a moment we might see Frank as one traumatized veteran attempting to connect with another.

The “New York’s Finest” episode of *Daredevil* concludes with Karen examining an X-ray which shows a traumatic injury to Frank’s skull that he received during combat. Though the manner in which the camera frames the X-ray foreshadows the skull that Frank creates as the Punisher’s logo, it also presents him as a damaged man worthy of sympathy and understanding, and Karen tries to fill this role for Frank. After the police arrest Frank, Karen is instrumental in Matt Murdock’s defending him in court and argues for a defense based upon his injury in tandem with PTSD in episode seven, “Semper Fidelis.” Moreover, in season two, episode six, of *Daredevil*, “Regrets Only,” it is Karen who helps Frank remember the happiness he felt with his family. Tearfully, he thanks her for this and two will continue to bond, with Frank saving Karen’s life in *The Punisher* series.

In episode ten of the first season of *The Punisher*, “Virtue of the Vicious,” Frank rescues Karen from Lewis, another soldier who has been driven to violence as the result of PTSD. In the kitchen of a grand hotel, Lewis has strapped Karen with a bomb. Frank, unarmed, first seeks to reason with Lewis. Even unarmed, the viewer knows that Frank represents more than a formidable opponent, so that the departure from his usual modus operandi as the Punisher is worthy of commentary. Instead of the Punisher confronting an enemy who, he deems, needs to be killed, for a moment we might see Frank as one traumatized veteran attempting to connect with another. He tells Lewis, “You and me, we

are the same. We try to pretend that there is something more, something noble. Brothers-in-arms, right?”²⁰

Simultaneously, Frank’s distancing himself from the usual violence he employs comes from concern, as Palmer argues, for Karen, his “family.” Following her rescue, Karen herself states of Frank that, “He was looking out for me. Frank Castle is not a terrorist,” when a police SWAT team corners him.²¹ Though such moments do provide another optic for viewing Frank’s characterization as the Punisher, it might be asked if these same moments are not as equally and rapidly deconstructed. After Karen is safe, Lewis locks himself in a storage room in the kitchen and the viewer witnesses a sharp change in Frank’s demeanor as he now encourages a cornered Lewis, who is safe from him behind a reinforced door, to take his own life and die “like a soldier” by denotating a bomb.²² As Frank notes in the previous episode of season one, “Front Toward Enemy,” he plans to kill rather than redeem Lewis, since “This piece of shit is going after Karen.”²³

In line with such examples concerning Karen from the Netflix *Daredevil* and *Punisher* series, Worchester disagrees with Palmer’s thesis concerning the humanization of Frank via surrogate familial ties, arguing that “When the Punisher dons his costume, it is more like a

²⁰ Lightfoot, Steve, creator. *The Punisher*. Netflix, 2017.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

uniform than a disguise. The character has no family or friends to protect, nor does he struggle to contain his inner demons.”²⁴ Though he does attract allies such as Karen, Worchester asserts that the Punisher fails to form meaningful relationships. For example, in episode thirteen, season two, of Netflix’s *Daredevil*, entitled “A Cold Day in Hell’s Kitchen,” Frank returns to his family’s home. On the one hand, Frank has lost touch with his former life and cannot re-incorporate himself, as we see when he opens the piano but then stops before beginning to play. Frank is next seen in his family’s kitchen, a room with an abandoned, haunted feeling. Sitting in a chair at the kitchen table which is still set for a meal which never did nor will take place, Frank opens an old newspaper which bears the headline: “FRANK CASTLE DEAD.”²⁵ In the family garage where all his tools are still neatly on display, Frank “gets to work” by creating the Punisher’s infamous skull logo. Palmer reads the skull as the part of Frank “that died with his family as well as his own eventual status as a bringer of death to those he hunts.”²⁶

In a dramatic final image, Frank sets fire to his home. As it burns in the background, Frank walks ever closer to the camera in the foreground until the skull on his shirt fills the entire frame. The overall symbolism is quite clear: Frank has died and now only the Punisher remains. As Frank tells *Daredevil* in episode eleven, season two, entitled, “11.03.88,” he is a man who needs a war and

once “You cross over to my side of the line... You don’t get to come back from that.”²⁷ We note a similar treatment of the character in DiPaolo’s discussion of Michael France’s idea for the 2004 film screenplay: “Frank Castle the family man dies with his family and he reverts to... a completely ruthless psycho who goes after the mobsters who killed his family.”²⁸ Even the introductory credits of *The Punisher* series conclude with an arsenal of guns coming together to form the show’s title suggesting in terms of architextuality that the Punisher is nothing more than a walking personification of mob and gun violence in America.

The pattern that emerges is one in which Frank Castle, the Punisher, is a more complex character than we might at first assume. He is capable of moments of human connection, but these never last for him. In the same manner, his memory of his family during his night with Beth Quinn (Alexa Davalos) in episode one of season two of *The Punisher*, “Roadhouse Blues,” quickly transitions into another memory of his brutally beating the man who killed his family. In the same episode, he continues to wear his wedding ring against his chest, though this is covered by his body armor and skull logo. Ultimately, in the multitude of readings surrounding him, he is an emblem of a violence that has become all too common, as well as a call for discussion of the importance of connecting with others in an honest and compassionate manner to try to prevent the same. A

24 Worchester, pp. 39-40.

25 Goddard, Drew, creator. *Daredevil*. Netflix, 2015.

26 Palmer, pp. 202-203.

27 Goddard, op. cit.

28 DiPaolo, p. 133.