ABSTRACT: This article offers a reading of DC’s groundbreaking 1985 series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in order to think about the history of event comics and their importance to the comic-book industry. Working from a position that favors a media studies approach to understanding the history and development of franchises and media industries, I present two arguments about *Crisis*. First, *Crisis* responded to a cultural sense of crisis and calamity in the US through a narrative that featured the destruction of dozens of universes and that killed off multiple prominent characters. Second, in addition to voicing late-Cold War anxieties about global capitalism and the generalized, easily marketable woes of postmodernity through the trope of a calamitous event of unprecedented proportions, *Crisis* also exhibited anxieties about franchising in the comic-book and media industries in the 1980s. This maxi-series gave voice to both the cultural and economic anxieties of the comic-book industry in the 1980s, while inaugurating the event comic as a publishing tool for rebooting and revitalizing fictional universes.

KEYWORDS: capitalist crisis, comic-book event, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, culture of calamity, DC Comics, franchise anxiety
It is by now a cliché, though by no means any less apparent for being one, that post-modernity and the contemporary are defined in part by crisis, catastrophe, and calamity. As Kevin Rozario observed in the opening of *The Culture of Calamity*, “If the content of movies, video games, and network news reports is any indication, we live in a culture of calamity.”¹ Indeed, today the highest grossing films in the United States, many of them entries in transmedial superhero franchises spawned from the intellectual properties (IP) owned by Marvel and DC Comics, pay homage to the culture of calamity. Such films respond to the disaster capitalism of neoliberalism, an observation forcefully made by Dan Hassler-Forest in his aptly titled study of superhero films in the Bush era, *Capitalist Superheroes*. The city-crushing, body-smashing, world-rending climaxes of superhero films literalize the destructive tendencies of global capitalism and make blatantly obvious its deleterious effects on economies, ecologies, and bodies.²

In the past three decades the comics showcasing the masked figures who inspire such films have met the film industry’s penchant for catastrophe with equal fervor. While the cinema has its blockbusters, the comic-book shop has its “events”: limited series, typically six to twelve issues, that narrate fictional-universe-spanning conflicts between superpowered beings, the effects of which often crossover into ongoing comic-book series as title characters deal with the fallout from the event. Events are often used by mainstream comic-book companies, notably Marvel and DC, to boost sales and to act as catalysts for rebooting, reorganizing, and renumbering a company’s publishing slate. Events such as Marvel’s recent *Civil War II* (2016) or DC’s *Rebirth* (2016) represent, on the one hand, crises within the industry as comic-book companies scramble to make themselves relevant to readers in an age of diminishing sales and growing reader diversity, and on the other, crises within the storyworld, where it is not uncommon for beloved characters or entire planets (or universes) to suffer tragic, calamitous fates—even if those fates prove easily reversible. While an exceptional amount of attention in comics studies has been given to the culture of calamity propounded by superhero films, as well as their reflection on the state of industrial filmmaking practices, little has been said about event comics.

In this article I offer a reading of DC’s groundbreaking 1985 series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (hereafter, *Crisis*)—ostensibly, an attempt by two fan-favorite creators to simplify a confusing bevy of duplicate characters and parallel universes into one shared storyworld—in order to think about the history of event comics and their importance to the comic-book industry. While I briefly discuss Marvel’s *Secret Wars* (1984–1985), I focus my reading on *Crisis* because the comic and its publishing history highlight the ways in which creators and the industry interacted with comics history, continuity, fandom, and the structures of the media entertainment market in the mid-1980s to produce the sort of intracompany franchising that has become a staple of contemporary event comics and the episteme of the superheroic catastrophe they define. Working from a position that favors a media studies approach to understanding the history and development of franchises and media industries, I argue that *Crisis* responded to a cultural sense of crisis and calamity in the US through a narrative that featured the destruction of dozens of universes and that killed off multiple prominent characters. *Crisis* marked an escalation of the scale of the
superhero narrative, moving beyond three-to-four-issue storylines involving half-a-dozen or so characters, to weave a story involving hundreds of characters, making the comic into a metaphorical catalogue of mid-Eighties IP owned by DC.

Highlighting current concerns in comics and media studies, I argue that in addition to voicing late-Cold War anxieties about global capitalism and the generalized, easily marketable woes of postmodernity through the trope of a calamitous event of unprecedented proportions, *Crisis* also exhibited anxieties about franchising in the comic-book and media industries in the 1980s. It is no coincidence that the so-called Dark Age of comics (c. 1985–2001) overlapped with unprecedented media deregulation and conglomeration in the US. At the same time, the production of saleable, media-portable IP became the driving force behind comic-book companies’ financial success. *Crisis* gave voice to both the cultural and economic anxieties of the comic-book industry in the 1980s, while inaugurating the event comic as a publishing tool for rebooting and revitalizing fictional universes. In the years since *Crisis* attempted to collapse the complexity of DC’s storyworlds, comic-book companies have employed event comics in increasingly frantic measure, hoping in each case to restore some narrative order to their IP and to boost sales, while also striving to produce stories and art that set them apart from competitors.

**DECADE OF DISASTER AND THE CALAMITY OF CRISS**

The story of 1985’s *Crisis* began three decades earlier, when DC’s superhero universe became a multiverse. In 1956, two years after the infamous “comics crusade” that culminated with a Congressional hearing accusing comics of causing juvenile delinquency, and thus in the creation of the industry’s self-regulating standard, the Comics Code Authority,4 DC published *Showcase* #4, debuting The Flash in a sleek red superhero costume to a new generation of readers. The Flash originally appeared in 1940, the star of his own series, *Flash Comics*. *Showcase* #4 marked the beginning of a trend that characterized the 1950s and 1960s: remaking older characters, and changing the origin stories and often names of characters beneath their superheroic masks (the Forties Flash, Jay Garrick, was replaced by the late-Fifties Flash, Barry Allen; likewise, Green Lantern was revamped, renamed, and the source of his powers revised). For longtime readers the multiplicity of conflicting characters and stories threw into question the narrative continuity of the fictional universe maintained by DC and signaled an expansion at the industry level of IP. In 1961, just as Marvel was making headway with its melodramatic, complex superhero universe, DC decided to explain away conflicting characters by having the Flash of the Forties meet the current one, creating in the process two parallel earths: Earth-1 and Earth-2. *The Flash* #123 (Sep. 1961) introduced the concept of the DC Multiverse, with the contemporary Flash offering an explanation for the existence of two nearly identical worlds: “My theory is, both Earths were created at the same time in two quite similar universes! They vibrate differently—which keeps them apart! Life, customs—even languages—evolved on your Earth almost exactly as they did on my Earth.”5 This new multiverse was explained as a set
of parallel universes, often referred to in DC’s lingo as earths, separated in the language of pulpy science fiction by universal vibrations.

Taking the implication of The Flash’s explanation of the multiverse to its extreme, by 1981 DC’s creators had invented more than thirty different earths to host the exploits of its multiplied superheroes. The confusion wrought by the unchecked expansion of the multiverse was brought to the attention of one of DC’s top writers when Marv Wolfman received a letter from a perplexed reader, which he published in the letter column of Green Lantern #143 (Aug. 1981), responding, “One day we [. . .] will probably straighten out what is in the DC universe [. . .] and what is outside.” Crisis was written to straighten out DC’s multiverse. With this twelve-issue maxi-series Wolfman sought to feature “all the DC super-heroes from the past, present and future” in a story that would collapse DC’s multiversal complexity into one streamlined universe where all of the superheroes who survived the apocalyptic incident could continue to thrive. With the help of artist George Pérez, Wolfman created a story in which the Anti-Monitor of Qward, god of the anti-matter universe that exists beyond the multiverse, destroys all but one of the universes and its earth. Earth-1 and select heroes from the other earths are left in the wake of this catastrophe, prevented by the sacrifice of more than a dozen characters, including Supergirl and Barry Allen, the Flash whose 1956 debut began the multiverse. Thus, Crisis was the symbolic end to an era of continuity confusion and a signal that the previous period—the Bronze Age to aficionados—had transitioned to something different, something new.

Crisis is famously a pastiche of DC’s then fifty-year history, reintroducing characters long forgotten, mixing and molding plotlines, and emerging on the other side of calamity as the supposed impetus for a new era in the history of DC—one that was taken quite literally as creators like Frank Miller reenvisioned a darker frame for a classic superhero, or as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons published their swansong to the superhero genre. Crisis is a valorization of the superhero genre. The pages are overcrowded with, at times, dozens of simultaneous narratives competing for dominance, only to be subsumed into the larger threat of an anti-matter apocalypse. Moments of needed respite are found in the dramatic deaths of beloved characters and in the mourning of friends. One character, an immortal scientist named Pariah, who is forced to watch the death of every universe, is driven slowly insane, witnessing as he does the deaths of billions. Other characters, like the Supermans (Kal-El and Kal-L) of different universes, must contend with their duality. Amid this chaos, readers are confronted with some of the most artistically complex pages drawn for mainstream comics in the 1980s. Pérez, whose mastery and experimental use of space on the comics page had won him fame with readers of The New Teen Titans in the early 1980s, manipulates panels and borders in Crisis to match the frantic, urgent nature of Wolfman’s occasionally incomprehensible narrative. Pérez’s depiction of the climax of Crisis #4, for example, exemplifies the boldness of his art, defying conventional panel, narrative, chronological, and spatial organization as he thematically synchronizes the destruction of an unnamed universe by an anti-matter wave with images of the tormented reaction of Pariah (currently on an extradimensional space station), who weeps over the dead body.
of the Monitor (a primordial superhero, the only person who could have stopped the anti-matter waves, and the twin of the Anti-Monitor), and with the stunned responses of six teams of superheroes operating on six different earths, as they inexplicably witness the destruction of the unnamed universe—a direct result of the Monitor’s death. It is a powerful moment that unites dozens of Wolfman’s narrative eccentricities and prefigures the many character and universe deaths to come.

Of course, words such as crisis, anxiety, and calamity, which supply the tonal makeup of Crisis, evoke multiple, shifting, powerful referents. What crisis meant at a barebones semantic level even in the very title of the comic-book series Crisis is not exactly clear. At the very least, the title signified to potential readers in 1985 some imminent moment fraught with destructive potential for DC’s characters and worlds. The possibility for destruction was confirmed even before Crisis hit the stands, on account of readers’ knowledge of the generic expectations of superhero comics and also because the advertisements for the series hyperbolized that “The DC universe will never be the SAME!!” and “Worlds will live . . . Worlds will die . . . And that’s only the beginning!!” Crisis, then, was utilized as a categorical signifier of the potential for a system—the DC universe, superheroes’ (story) worlds—to be disrupted and forever changed. As the title for a comic, the term crisis, with its vague allusions to inalterable changes to DC’s storyworld, was particularly suggestive; it played up reader anticipation and provoked anxiety about beloved characters, at the same time that it played on anxieties about world-ending calamities both real and imagined in the 1980s.

Where other scholars have read Crisis primarily along narratological lines—as evidencing, for example, the ways in which American superhero comics require their readers to juggle “set[s] of mutually incompatible storyworlds” and therefore to challenge classical notions of mental processing and even of cosmology itself; or as a case study in how a comic-book company handles the difficulties of continuity that developed across decades of superhero narratives crafted by hundreds of creators—I want to instead consider DC’s first event comic as a cultural artifact. Crisis is a product of the “decade of disaster,” as Ann Larabee has described the 1980s, and therefore is part of a disaster archive of sorts, but it is also an artifact of the changing landscape of the comics industry and the media industries at large, a material and narrative response to the demands of franchising that exhibited in the process the anxious tensions between corporate profit, franchised IP, and individual artistic production. Crisis and disaster, as well as anxiety, are thus crucial keywords for thinking about the interstitial relationship between event comics, the comic-book industry, the media marketplace, and neoliberal capitalism—a relationship, following Rozario, that might itself be dubbed “the culture of calamity.”

Rozario’s culture of calamity refers to the constitutive relationship between disaster, government, capitalism, and the individual, a relationship that he also defines as the “catastrophic logic of modernity,” or, “one of the abiding, and defining, contradictions of our time: that we live in a society infatuated with, and entertained by, spectacles of calamity that is nevertheless willing to sacrifice all sorts of civil liberties in exchange for gov-
ernment and corporate protection against those same calamities.” Modernity, in other words, is produced through “a quest to make the world more secure... through development patterns that move through cycles of ruin and renewal, bust and boom, destruction and construction, producing as their collateral damage myriad social conflicts as well as technological and environmental hazards.” Modernity is thus a dialectic of disaster and anti-disaster, and our cultural fascination with calamities—whether they appear on the evening news or are the topic of the next blockbuster film—is one way in which we mediate our understanding of this dialectic. “Catastrophes,” Rozario argues, “generate an extraordinary amount of cultural production.” Not coincidentally, catastrophes are also central to capitalism. For Karl Marx, the business cycle of capitalism was precisely “the alteration of prosperity and crisis,” an observation that Marx codified as “the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall,” which he considered “in every respect the most important law of modern political economy.” Like modernity, characterized by the tension between disasters and the efforts to keep safe from them, capitalism is descriptive of cycles of movement between profit and fall, boom and bust. Crisis and calamity (or disaster or catastrophe) thus have much in common, and Rozario suggests that the two (or three or four) are interchangeable in the history of American modernity, its fascination with disaster, and the cycles of capitalism that both structure and are structured by modernity’s culture of calamity. The destructive creation afforded by capitalism and the culture of calamity alike have equally constituted the catastrophic logic of modernity in America since the eighteenth century.

While Rozario supplies a matrix of concepts within which it is possible to think about a destruction-loving comic like Crisis, event comics, and the comic-book industry, Larabee offers an account of the 1980s as a decade that reframed disaster in technological terms. Larabee shows how a series of technological-industrial catastrophes including the failed responses to HIV/AIDS beginning in 1981, the Bhopal gas leak (1984), the Challenger space shuttle explosion (1986), the Chernobyl nuclear power plant meltdown (1986), and the Exxon Valdez oil spill (1989) “stimulated debate over the rise of powerful multinationals exporting dangerous systems, the role of modern political institutions in gaining loyalty for massive technological investments, the dangers of an increasingly mechanized lifeworld, the eroding cultural distinctions between humans and machines, and social obligations to disaster victims.” So while Rozario presents disaster as a way of life for Americans, Larabee argues for its specific implications in creating a cultural shift during the 1980s in our relationship to—and representation of—technology, government, and corporations. At the same time, this shift took place against the backdrop of both the threat of nuclear war during one of the most intense moments of the Cold War and the rise from 1977 onward of what Naomi Klein has dubbed “disaster capitalism,” or “the radical privatization of war and disaster,” which she argues is a specific articulation of what has elsewhere been referred to as either neoliberalism or globalization, attuned to the spectacles of war, violence, and torture as they were capitalized on by private corporation, became integral to governance, and became common in the popular media.
The technological-industrial disasters of the 1980s and conservative policies of Reagan’s late-Cold War America that fostered the growth of capitalism attendant to disaster—not to mention the backlash against radical social movements of previous decades and resultant reinscription of straight white masculinity to hegemonic status—provide the frame in which a comic like Crisis was dreamed up by Marv Wolfman, approved by editors, written and drawn, marketed and sold, and ultimately read. Crisis certainly imbibles and regurgitates the general sense of being embedded in a “decade of disaster,” as well as the particular fears of 1980s techno-scientific disasters. In the pivotal seventh issue of the series, the superheroine Harbinger (the protégé of the now-dead Monitor) explains to a group of superheroes about to spearhead an attack on the Anti-Monitor’s fortress that the crisis destroying universes was begun ten billion years prior by a scientist of an alien species, the Oans, with ambitions beyond his society’s ethical scope. Harbinger describes the antediluvian Oans as living in a “paradise. Their minds and bodies were things of perfection. In such a world one would expect a winding down . . . a lessening of continued advancement . . . / But such was not the case. They strove always for improvement of the mind and the spirit . . . / Their science has never been equaled.” But this utopian society of scientists was disrupted by the ambitious Krona, who performed an experiment that would allow him “to learn the origin of the universe!” But the experiment went awry: “At that moment was born both the anti-matter universe and the multiverse.” Krona was punished and exiled, and his techno-scientific disaster caused the dissolution of Oan society. Also as a result of the creation of the multiverse, the Monitor and Anti-Monitor were born, began a war with one another, and eventually rendered one another unconscious for nine billion years. Pariah then reveals that his own “false pride led to the fall of everything” when he conducted a similar experiment that breached the anti-matter universe and awoke the Anti-Monitor, whereupon he began to devour positive matter universes, beginning with Pariah’s. As a result of his connection to the Anti-Monitor, Pariah is mysteriously dragged to the site of each universe’s death, a phenomenon that the Monitor, also awoken by the experiment, uses to track his evil twin in order to rally superheroes to save the multiverse. The crisis on infinite earths, then, is a direct result of two technological disasters representative of the postwar ambition to utilize industrial science to better society, all claims that could have been made of the technological developments that produced the great disasters of the 1980s. Indeed, like Krona’s Oa, Pariah’s world was a utopia produced through magnificent scientific advancements that allowed for social harmony and control: Pariah himself “conquered all disease” and “freed [the world] from toil.” While Crisis, through figures like Pariah, exemplifies the cultural anxieties about disaster and techno-science in 1980s America, I find it productive to think of Crisis as equally a material and narrative response to the comics industry of the 1980s. Following Larabee’s insistence vis-à-vis Derrida that we turn our attention to disaster archives, we might consider Crisis as a text in just such an archive—to put it cynically, the disaster of the comic-book event.
INDUSTRY, FRANCHISE, EVENT

To write about event comics is to write about the history of the comic-book industry, its production practices, and its imbrication in the mass media entertainment industry. Event comics such as Crisis have been largely ignored by comics scholars as a result of the field’s overwhelming preoccupation, as Andrew Hoberek has remarked, with “individually produced, independently published, nonsuperhero” comics. Indeed, event comics are ridiculed for their unself-conscious glorification of the superhero genre and their seemingly solely commercial purpose. And while event comics, like any comic book, provide opportunities for individual creators and artists to work within the framework of the comics industry by telling the stories about characters owned as IP by comic-book companies that are in turn owned by multinational corporations, their place at the center of a company’s publishing schedule and their reliance on the crossover popularity of the major characters featured in each event to draw in readers and drive up sales require that comics scholars consider seriously the economic position of comics series and trends that embody the most commercial aspects of the industry. A focus on event comics like Crisis is doubly important to the study of comics history because their creation was contingent upon a number of industrial and cultural forces that only coalesced in the 1980s, as comic-book companies responded to shifts in creator, reader, and market demands concurrent with the conglomeration of media industries and the rise of cross-media franchising.

In the annals of comic-book history, the 1980s are perhaps best known for three major publications from 1986: Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s Watchmen, Frank Miller’s Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, and Art Spiegelman’s Maus. Together, these three comics are said to have transformed mainstream superhero comics, to have made them—and the industry and genre that Watchmen and Dark Knight belong to—more mature, “adult.” All three are immediately foregrounded in the introduction to Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey’s The Graphic Novel: An Introduction, and despite there being a rather long history of the aesthetic form that the term “graphic novel” indicates, Baetens and Frey point out that it was not until the publication of these three graphic novels—all of which are in fact bound collections of previously serialized comic books or strips—that mass media and academia recognized the graphic novel as a legitimate art form. Indeed, Roger Sabin argues that on account of “The Big 3,” comics in the US were undergoing an “adult comics revolution” characterized by “a move away from fandom and into the mainstream,” with comics like Watchmen featuring themes, narratives, and images that catered to a larger adult audience brought about, in part, by the shift from niche to mainstream marketing. According to Sabin,

The Big 3 . . . received coverage in all the major periodicals, including Time, Newsweek, and even the Wall Street Journal. Dark Knight featured on the New York Times best-seller list for thirty-two weeks, while Maus won the American National Book Award for biography. All the major press publications reported the “Comics Grow Up” story, and there was also significant radio and TV cov-
Although comics have now become an object of a burgeoning field of study thanks in large part to the public reception of 1986’s Big 3, the field retains a bias for what Douglas Wolk calls “art comics” in opposition to “mainstream comics”—for the most part of the superhero genre.34 Crisis, which debuted the year before Watchmen and Dark Knight, cannot be understood except in relation to the shifting terrain of comics in the 1980s, which comics scholars have largely studied as a shift away from puerile superheroic fantasies and toward more serious fare: Wolk’s “art comics” or Charles Hatfield’s “alternative comics.”35 But the independent, auteur comics of the 1980s—even those that were published by mainstream companies like DC Comics, which led the way in bringing indie British creators like Brian Bolland, Neil Gaiman, Gibbons, Dave McKean, Peter Milligan, Moore, and Grant Morrison to American comics—only tell a fraction of the story, one that focuses overmuch on comics that eschewed the aesthetics and narratives of what was most popular and most common in comic-book shops. Indeed, when Hoberek comments that “the transformation of the comic book industry in the early eighties made possible a book like Watchmen,”36 he means that the development of the direct market—that is, the localization of comics fandom in comic-book shops and major lay publications like The Comics Journal (1977–), and the development of a speculative collectors market—all made possible the sale of limited-issue series like Watchmen and, before it, Crisis.37 The growth of the direct market in the 1980s set the conditions of possibility for new ways of telling comics stories and for marketing them.

The development of the direct market in the late 1970s and its solidification in the 1980s was perhaps the single most significant change in the American comic-book industry since the anti-comics campaign of the 1940s and 1950s. Principally, the direct market represented a new era in comic-book distribution. Since the 1930s comic books had been sold by publishers to newsstands, grocery and drugstores, and the occasional bookstore via national magazine and newspaper distribution networks that cared very little about the low-cost, youth-audience comics, and that often committed fraud by filing affidavit returns for comics that had never even been placed on shelves (e.g., only one-fourth of the comics printed in 1974 were placed for sale38). Beginning with young comic-book collectors in the early 1970s, the direct market system consolidated comic-book distribution with a few small, comic-book-only distributors who sold directly to specialty stores. These specialty stores, or comic-book shops, were often opened by collectors who sold new material from the direct market alongside comics from their own collections. The direct market produced a nearly instantaneous rise in comic-book sales, rescuing the precarious state of the late-1970s comic-book market from bankruptcy, and accounting for an overwhelming proportion of mainstream comic-book publishers’ sales revenues by 1980. Moreover, the direct market and the comic-book shops it helped to create—as many as 3,000 nationwide...
by the mid-1980s—provided a locus for fans to buy, sell, trade, discuss, and critique comics of all varieties, ranging from the mainstream products of Marvel and DC to alternative, independent, and self-published comics.

The direct market’s crystallization as the primary distribution system for comics, and the subsequent creation of the comic-book shop as the geographic center of comics fandom (and their purchases) mirrored the higher-scale shifts in the entertainment media industry that centralized the profits and assets of entertainment platforms and distribution models under fewer and fewer multinational conglomerates. Jennifer Holt describes the development of such conglomerates in *Empires of Entertainment*, where she traces the ways in which media companies and governmental and legal bodies (e.g., the Federal Communications Commission, Federal Trade Commission, and Department of Justice) worked side by side for the laxening of antitrust policy and corporate regulations from the beginning of the Reagan era and the ushering in of widespread neoliberal policies to the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which among other things relaxed cross-media ownership policies, thereby allowing the massive mergers that consolidated most media companies under the umbrellas of conglomerates like The Walt Disney Company and Time Warner. What Henry Jenkins has referred to as “economic convergence” or the “horizontal integration of the entertainment industry” in the late 1990s and 2000s, Holt refers to instead as “structural convergence” in order to describe the “mixture of horizontal and vertical integration and conglomeration” that co-occurred throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the government deregulation that allowed such conglomerates to arise. Structural convergence in the media industries resulted in comic-book companies being joined to conglomerates as just one entertainment arm of the media Hecatoncheires. DC Comics, for example, which was purchased by Kinney National in 1967, became a subsidiary of Warner Communications through a merger in 1972, and throughout the 1980s was joined with various film, cable, broadcast, gaming, publishing, and other media or media-related production and distribution companies, becoming Time Warner after a two-year merger in 1989.

One significant result of structural convergence was the growth of media franchising—a cooperative business strategy whereby one company licenses its IP to another in order to maximize profit through licensing fees and minimize the risk of poor sales. In the realm of media, franchising is the basis for the transmedia extension of stories, occurring both inter-industry (“transmedia extension across the social and industrial context of multiple media industries”) and intra-industry (“multiplication across productions in a single medium”). Though originally meant to describe the relationship between a franchisor (e.g., McDonald’s) and a franchisee (e.g., a local entrepreneur who wants to start a McDonald’s, believing that the brand will boost sales better and faster than a new, unknown restaurant would), Derek Johnson has shown how the business strategy became integral to the media industries at precisely the same time that Holt’s “empires of entertainment” were emerging. Johnson argues that “in the film, television, video game, comic, and toy industries of the 1980s, the franchised production of content emerged in strategic response
to new distributional structures within each market”44 and by 1988 was a “$54.3 billion-
dollar-a-year business.”45 The ultimate desire, aside from and for the sake of maximizing
profit, was to create greater levels of familiarity between entertainment and audience by
offering “not just cultural products, but systems of cultural products.”46

The growth of such systems of products—for example, tie-in video games, comics,
and action figures accompanying the release of a film, all of which taken together create
a deeper transmedial relationship between the audience and the film’s storyworld—was
partly a result of convergence that placed the various industries under the same corporate
roofs. There was across all media in the 1980s a shift away from generating mass-consum-
able popular culture and toward marketing to and distribution in “smaller, more valuable,
localized markets.”47 The cultivation of systems of products, as Johnson suggests, was also
the result of changes specific to the various media, for example the development of the
comic-book direct market that took advantage of industrial investments in smaller markets
and franchising. Johnson provides the example of Marvel’s X-Men comics in the 1980s
and 1990s as evidence of corporate investment in localized markets and the possibilities
for intra-industrial franchising, since the characters of the original X-Men comic, Uncanny
X-Men, crossed over and expanded into several X-Men comics series, reader interest
in which was driven by readers’ previous familiarity with the characters from Uncanny
X-Men.48 Johnson’s reading of Marvel’s X-Men franchise suggests that, since the rise of the
direct market, Marvel and DC have relied increasingly on intra-industrial franchising in
order to both encourage and meet demand for “the intensification of seriality and contin-
ui ty between titles.”49 Johnson’s foundational study of media franchising, paired with Holt’s
history of media conglomeration, demonstrate that the understudied direct market and the
development of event comics were embedded in social, economic, and industrial struc-
tures of significance to media studies beyond the insular focus on comics. Event comics
like Crisis and Marvel’s less-successful, earlier event, Secret Wars, are therefore symptoms
of this confluence of structural changes occurring in the 1980s mediascape and represent
the collaborative efforts of creators, editors, and IP-owners to navigate the complexities of
intra-industrial franchising at a moment in that strategy’s accretion across media.

Event comics, in other words, only emerged as a result of the development of mul-
tinational media conglomerates and the new emphasis on franchising in the 1980s. This
was quite literally the case with the first event comic, Secret Wars, a twelve-issue maxi-se-
ries released throughout 1984 and 1985 that was created as a marketing tool for a toy line
and that merged together dozens of Marvel superheroes into one title. The story was, like
that of Crisis, rather convoluted: a cosmic entity capable of manipulating reality, called
the Beyonder, places heroes and villains into a fight-to-the-death scenario on a planet
called Battleworld, where the heroes and villains work through internecine conflicts to
defeat the Beyonder, then Dr. Doom (after he assumes the former’s powers), and escape.
Secret Wars was ultimately an inter-industrial franchising opportunity, a reaction by the
toy company Mattel—creators of the He-Man toys, which became the basis for a fran-
chised television show, He-Man and the Masters of the Universe—to a franchising agree-
ment struck between toy company Kenner, of Star Wars toy fame, and DC. Mattel feared a monopoly on superhero action figures, and approach Shooter with the deal to make a comic that would excite buyer interest. But the event also utilized intra-industrial franchising to boost interest in the comic itself: Amazing Spider-Man #251, Uncanny X-Men #180, Iron Man #181, Incredible Hulk #294, The Thing #10, Thor #341, and Avengers #242 all included scenes that led directly into the beginning of Secret Wars #1, and to date the eighth issue of the event is regarded as a comics collector’s treasure, since it featured the first appearance of Spider-Man’s black symbiote suit. Despite being for the most part formally uninspired and artistically uninteresting, Secret Wars was nonetheless an economic success for Marvel, and though they beat DC to the printer, the latter already had its major, company-wide crossover event well underway.

Marvel’s Secret Wars exemplified the significance of comic-book companies to the franchising schemes of the 1980s, and especially of the importance of superhero IP to building inter-industrial franchises. Crisis, on the other hand, showcased the extremes of intra-industrial franchising and in the process simulated creator and reader anxieties about franchising and the primacy of IP in the new era of media conglomeration. The origin story of Crisis, like that of any comic-book character who has been around for a few decades, is multiple—and this multiplicity of explanations for the creation of the comic, for the instantiation of event comics as major moves in marketing and IP continuity control within the comics industry, belies some of what makes Crisis so important. Wolfman described Crisis as a “repair job” in the editorial that accompanied issue #1, claiming it would fix “the morass of continuity” that DC’s “writers and artists have often mentioned . . . they wished . . . could be repaired.” “By series end,” he promised, “DC will have a consistent and more easily understandable universe to play with.” Backing Wolfman’s initial statement on Crisis, media scholar Will Brooker explained, “Its principle aim was to clean up the mess of parallel universes which DC’s writers had established over the past forty-five years, in order to start fresh with a single, easy-to-follow continuity. Crisis was thus pitched to readers—and, if Brooker’s assessment is any indication, accepted—as a salve to the supposedly overwhelming complexity of DC’s multiverse. It was also a project, Wolfman explains, that DC President and Publisher Jenette Kahn was wholly behind.

The narrative Wolfman provides in the editorial in Crisis #1 is a simplistic one, offering a letter published in a comic he edited as evidence of a sincere and widespread problem for DC readers, who might be said to have lamented the fact that DC lacked the attempted shared worldbuilding of Marvel’s comics. Moreover, Wolfman’s narrative suggests that reader confusion may have signaled a financial liability to DC’s higher-ups.

Kahn’s swift approval of the project in 1981, shortly after Wolfman published and responded to the reader letter in Green Lantern #143, and her decision to have the event coincide with the company’s fiftieth anniversary, confirms the notion that a simplified continuity might be considered a more marketable asset. As Sean Howe notes in his history of Marvel, Warner executives understood their subsidiary DC’s principal financial strength to be as an IP farm for franchising deals, so much so that in 1984, Warner Publishing’s
Jim Sarnoff offered to license the comics-publishing rights for seven DC titles, including *Batman*, *Superman*, *Wonder Woman*, and DC’s new hit, Wolfman and Pérez’s *The New Teen Titans*. Marvel, however, backed out of negotiations after being hit by a lawsuit from the independent comics publisher First Comics for “anti-trust and anti-competitive activities.” Although Sarnoff was working above Kahn’s head, it is clear that the franchising potential of a simplified, streamlined, and easily accessible set of stories and characters set in one universe consistent across all DC titles was an appealing draw of *Crisis*. Not only might it lead to greater crossover sales between the comics and newly franchised television shows or toys, but *Crisis* might also become a launching point for greater levels of intra-industrial franchising, since a newly streamlined comic-book world would in theory make it easier for readers to jump into comics they had never read before and increase creators’ opportunities to utilize characters from beyond their comic’s traditional cast. Whatever new franchising potential it was thought *Crisis* might offer, Wolfman’s discussion of the origin of *Crisis* over a decade later, in the introduction to the 1998 trade paperback, points to other key ways in which the event comic refracts the 1980s mediascape, particularly as concerned the role of the individual creator working with corporate-owned IP.

Wolfman had begun the 1985 origin story with the *Green Lantern* fan letter, but he started the 1998 account with his adolescence in the 1960s, when he read early intra-industrial crossovers in which the Justice League of America encountered the Justice Society of America. The breadth of DC’s fictional worlds excited Wolfman, who, “being the greedy fan [he] was . . . wanted to see a single story featuring all the DC super-heroes from the past, present, and future.” He even invented a villain to make it happen: the Librarian, who, “living in a satellite orbiting the Earth, observed all the heroes, and sold the information he obtained about the heroes to other villains.” Wolfman also described loving the British television series *The Prisoner* (1967–1968), “the first intentional limited series with a beginning, middle and a definite end. . . . I loved the idea of a short-run series and wondered why it had never been done in comics.” Together, these two ideas formed the initial seed for an event comic that ultimately became *Crisis*. When Wolfman broke into comics in the late 1960s, he took the idea for a limited series to editors at Marvel and DC, but was told a limited series would not sell, since comics publishers believed “readers were suspicious of comics with low numbers.” While the latter part of this narrative points to the importance of the direct market to the development of limited series, Wolfman’s 1998 tale of his fannish desire some two decades before *Crisis* to see all of DC’s IP joined in one story highlights one of the central tensions of media franchising: collaboration.

This discussion of the origin of *Crisis* suggests precisely what Johnson has described as the primary relationship implicated in the industrial process of franchising, namely the collaboration between individual producers, who see themselves as separate artists responsible to their own work and to readers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the stakeholders, including editors, who stand in for the interests of the corporation that owns the IP with which individual artists or artistic teams produce new media products. To put it another way, Marv Wolfman may very well have desired from adolescence to produce
something like Crisis, and his successful (read: profitable) work at DC and the “proof” of reader confusion over DC continuity and its multiverse provided by the reader letter to Green Lantern allowed him to approach Kahn, who in her role as insurer of DC’s profits within the Warner media conglomerate thought that Wolfman’s comic would provide useful impetus for rearranging DC’s IP in such a way as to make the comics more approachable to new readers. The publicity that a major comics event like Crisis could bring, following the year after Marvel’s monetarily (but not critically) successful Secret Wars, no doubt also motivated DC and Warner executives. At the same time, Crisis offered DC a reason to celebrate, loudly and destructively, the company’s fiftieth anniversary by defining that celebration through the event: readers quite literally got to see fifty years’ worth of DC characters, storylines, and timelines championed in Crisis. The success of Crisis thus paved the way for future events to be dreamed up, approved, and marketed, though few since have been as expansive in narrative scope as Crisis was until the deteriorating quality of DC’s event comics was revived in the early 2000s by a series of events that directly addressed Wolfman and Pérez’s Crisis.

Crisis exemplified the very process of collaboration between creators and corporate stakeholders that enlivened and fueled franchising in the era of media conglomeration, reflecting the cultural crises of the 1980s as a decade of disaster at the same time that it refracted through its narrative the literal collapse of corporate power, metaphorized by the multiverse’s collapse into singularity and the death of all that was either extraneous or simply did not fit the new model of the DC universe. Crisis is perhaps the most extreme example of intra-industrial franchising in the midst of the 1980s mediascape, since the story captured all of DC’s IP into one series that narrated the internal relations of as many properties to one another as possible. As Wolfman described it in an editorial, “Four years in the making, over seven hundred characters will be affected.” But just as the comic’s production demonstrated the crisis of media conglomeration in the 1980s, so too did its narrative.

The character Wolfman invented for Crisis, Pariah, is more than just a warning against the dangers of techno-science in an age of industrial- and state-level techno-scientific disasters. Pariah is also a figure of readerly identification, “forced to observe the death-rattle of the multiverse” just as those who picked up Crisis in 1985 were. In fact, Pariah seems to exist purely to reflect back to the reader a sense of fear, loss, dread, and anxiety about everything happening—both in the comic and in the world. Pariah is a spectator of death and destruction through the comic, and close-ups of his face offer contortions of worry, fear, apprehension, terror, and dread. For the first four issues, Pariah repeatedly appears out of nowhere at the death of each consecutive universe, his face always already distorted and prepared for the destruction to come as he laments again and again the trauma of the repetitive calamities. For example, in his first appearance in the fourth issue, Pariah is introduced in a canted close-up of his face; his mouth is open in a protesting yell, his eyes shot wide open, and the background a symbolic splash of bright yellow with thick emphasis lines projecting Pariah’s distress outward. This panel takes up the bottom third
of the page, where Pariah once again reminds the reader, “It happens again and again—and I—I can do nothing to stem its destructive tide” and asks, to no one but the reader and himself, “But why must I witness such horror? Why?”—a dogged question that readers, four months into Crisis, were no doubt curious about themselves. That Pariah stands in for the reader’s horror at witnessing this collapsing of IP into one streamlined universe is further emphasized by his initial presentation on the wraparound cover of the first issue. This cover features a string of earths from the parallel universe torn apart by an anti-matter energy beam, thirteen heroes of those earths floating in the void of space. Pariah, however, stands in the lower right corner of the cover, his body squared to the edge of the page; his hands grasp his head, which is thrown back in a despairing yell, while his eyes stare out at the reader. Pariah is absolutely apart from the scene unfolding on the cover: he is an extradiegetic overlay, a melodramatic witness to Crisis not unlike the comic-book reader watching the structural convergence of the media industry metaphorized by Wolfman’s multiverse-collapsing narrative and brought to life by Pérez’s postmodern comics art.

CONCLUSION

Looking back on three decades of comic-book events, economic cycles of boom and bust in the comics industry, and companies’ struggles to meet ever-changing audience interests and demands, Crisis on Infinite Earths is something of an Ursprung—though not actually causative of this history, nonetheless an early symptom of the infinite crises in comic-book economics and narratives to come. Crisis is foremost a material and textual remainder of the 1980s comic-book scene and a testament to the shifts in media economies during that same period, but also the instigator for the popularity and narrative, as well as economic, significance of event comics as a publishing tactic. Today, events, like blockbuster films, dominate the publishing schedules of Marvel and DC, punctuating their regular schedule.

FIGURE 1.
“Pariah and the horror of IP” from Wolfman and Pérez, Crisis on Infinite Earths.
of serial comics at least once a year, though now both companies utilize the tactic of event comics at smaller levels, to tie related characters and series together in localized, rather than company-wide, comic-book catastrophes.

Take as an example DC’s “Death of the Family” storyline, which occurred across all Batman-related titles across late 2012 and early 2013, a year into DC’s company-wide reboot, The New 52 (itself the product of a multiverse-reordering event, Flashpoint), and concurrent with similar events among the Green Lantern (“Rise of the Third Army”) and Superman (“H'El on Earth”) titles, and a four-month, event-styled crossover between Justice League and Aquaman (“Throne of Atlantis”). “Death of the Family” told the story of the Joker’s final attempt to destroy the Batman and his comrades, and had ramifications across nine different comics series (Batgirl, Batman, Batman and Robin, Catwoman, Detective Comics, Nightwing, Red Hood and the Outlaws, Suicide Squad, and Teen Titans), each of which was branded with the “Death of the Family” logo and lettering. The bulk of the story took place in Batman with crossover into the rest of the series; while “Death of the Family” might thus be read as a complex crossover story arc, it was packaged as an event through advertisements that offered a full list of related comics, branded with a shared logo (like Crisis), and had story-altering significance to several titles, notably Batgirl, Batman and Robin, and Detective Comics. Months after the conclusion of the event, all related issues were collected in a special trade paperback, The Joker: Death of the Family, and those issues were remitted from the regular paperback collections of their respective series. Excepting “Throne of Atlantis,” the same is true of the above events-in-miniature that coincided with “Death of the Family.” As the example of “Death of the Family” demonstrates, comic-book companies have extended the spread of crossover storylines across more than a few issues and titles, branded them self-consciously as something other than a story arc, and packaged them in trade paperbacks outside of the usual reprints. Marvel, too, has employed the event model at smaller scales, especially among the many titles featuring the X-Men, at the same time that it has matched DC event for annual event, reboot for reboot (often with events as catalysts).

Although Crisis on Infinite Earths was born from the mind of a single creator who then worked in collaboration with others, and although that singular creator had the backing of DC’s stakeholders and the various editors to work with the entire catalogue of DC’s IP, the event comic nonetheless exuded a sense of self-referential worry about itself, about the state of affairs it might set up for DC comics to come (if the advertisements delivered as promised), and by extension about the contemporary state of the comics industry and its relationship to the larger economic structures of the media industries. Crisis exhibited the anxieties of the new moment in media history, which itself was a product of higher-scale shifts in economic and legal policies that (de)regulated how the media industry could operate and that were ultimately symptoms of Larabee’s decade of disaster, Rozario’s culture of calamity, Klein’s disaster capitalism, Harvey’s neoliberalism, and, through it all, Marx’s notion that capitalism produces crisis universally. Crisis, then, was both a narrative about and a narrative forged by the crises and calamities of capital and culture in 1980s America,
a sometimes self-conscious archive of the media industry and comic-book industry shifts that caused event comics to emerge in the first place.

NOTES


3. See Mark Voger, *The Dark Age: Grim, Great & Gimmicky Post-Modern Comics* (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows, 2006) for a popular history of this period from the perspective of the fan press. Voger also includes a lengthy discussion of *Crisis* (14–19).


5. Marv Wolfman, “Crisis Mail: Crisis Beginnings,” *Crisis on Infinite Earths* 1.1, by Marv Wolfman and George Pérez (New York: DC Comics, April 1985), interior cover wrap text. All quotations from comics, including emphases, ellipses, and unusual punctuation (all of which are common to comic-book lettering), appear as in the original unless otherwise specified. Additionally, I use forward slashes to denote word balloon and panel breaks, following the convention for representing line breaks in quoted poetry.


7. For a critique of the “ages of comics” system used by fans, the collectible comics market, and scholars alike, see Benjamin Woo’s “An Age-Old Problem: Problematics of Comic-Book Historiography,” *International Journal of Comic Art* 10.1 (Spring 2008): 268–79.


9. *DC Sampler* 1.3 (New York: DC Comics, Nov. 1984). *Crisis* was originally advertised in *DC Sampler*, a free preview catalog, as a ten-issue miniseries titled *Universe: Crisis on Infinite Earths*. The logo, title, and number of issues were later emended.


16. Thus far I have used words like catastrophe, disaster, calamity, and crisis interchangeably. While I recognize, as Rozario puts it when confronting the same problem, that “each possesses a slightly different shade of meaning” (*The Culture of Calamity*, 11), for the purposes of this essay the near synonymity of the terms is a useful tool for pointing to the interchange between such concepts as “culture of calamity,” “catastrophic logic of modernity,” “disaster capitalism,” and Marxist crisis theory, as well as the comic in question, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.

20. Larabee, Decade of Disaster, ix.
22. See for example Susan Jeffords’s Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), where she argues that “Reagan’s policies were geared not so much to the individual human body as it might be the material location of suffering, pain, or deprivation, as they were to the control of the idea of the body,” producing as a result two fundamental categories: the abnormal “soft body” and the normative “hard body,” defined by “strength, labor, determination, loyalty, and courage” (24) and that was also, “like Reagan’s own, male and white” (25). In light of Reagan’s mistreatment (and, early on, complete ignorance of) the AIDS crisis, it is safe to assume that the hard body is also a heterosexual one.
23. Of course, the political, economic, and social complexity of the 1980s have been reduced to nostalgia in recent years, as the anaesthetized memories of the decade have been packaged in television sitcoms like ABC’s The Goldbergs or dramas like Netflix’s Stranger Things. Marvel Comics has participated in this nostalgia as well, with the 2015 megahit event Secret Wars (named after the Secret Wars event comic of 1984) and Mark Millar’s 2008 miniseries Marvel 1985. For a thorough study of the relationship between nostalgia, capitalism, and popular culture, see Gary Cross, Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in an Age of Fast Capitalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
24. Wolfman and Pérez, Crisis on Infinite Earths, 182.
27. Wolfman and Pérez, Crisis on Infinite Earths, 186.
33. Sabin, Adult Comics, 176.
34. Douglas Wolk, Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 11. While Sabin and Wolk both use the term “mainstream,” their meanings differ in scale. By mainstream, Wolk implies the difference within the comics industry between those comics published by major, corporate-owned comic-book companies, e.g., Marvel and DC. Mainstream comics are thus of a different economic category than comics labeled alternative, independent, or “art.” For Sabin, the meaning of mainstream has the meaning of being well known to the public: popular beyond the small number of people who enter comic-book shops, i.e., those who Matthew Pustz has defined as “fanboys” in Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999). Except in reference to Sabin, my meaning of “mainstream” is equivalent to Wolk’s.
37. Even before Crisis, DC tried their hand at a limited series, with the campy Arthurian space fantasy Camelot 3000, a twelve-issue comic sold exclusively on the direct market beginning in 1982 but that, because of artist Brian Bolland’s desire to provide art up to his standards, and better than the typical monthly work he
was doing, was published intermittently until 1985. *Camelot 3000* was also the first mainstream comic to be printed on the more expensive, and thus more durable, Baxter paper. Marvel tried out a direct-market-only series in 1982 as well: *Dazzler*, which appeared monthly for forty-two issues.


42. Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*, 3. As Jenkins describes it in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), “horizontal integration” refers to “an economic structure in which companies own interests across a range of different but related industries as opposed to controlling production, distribution, and retail within the same industry” (286). Vertical integration, then, refers to companies controlling multiple points in the chain from production and distribution to marketing and retail.


51. See Sean Howe’s discussion of *Secret Wars*, which he frames within a larger problem Marvel was facing in the early to mid-1980s: “Marvel simply wasn’t turning out superheroes anymore” (Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 265; see 264–72).


53. Wolfman, “Crisis Mail: Crisis Beginnings.”


55. Wolfman, “Crisis Mail: Crisis Beginnings.”
56. As Wolfman describes it, he and Len Wein (who co-plotted Crisis #1) pitched Crisis under the title The History of the DC Universe to Kahn, who “loved the idea and gave us an instant go-ahead” and who also approved a “Death List” of characters to be killed off, reportedly responding that “we be even more daring in our thinking” (Wolfman, “Crisis Mail: Crisis Beginnings”).

57. Howe, Marvel Comics, 272.


62. There are apocryphal accounts of Marvel “scooping” the idea for an event comic, which became Secret Wars, when Shooter discovered what DC was planning with Crisis (Friedenthal, “Monitoring the Past,” n.p. n. 2).

63. The resulting singular universe could then be codified, as Wolfman and Pérez did in their follow-up, two-issue History of the DC Universe (1986), which provided the official history from beginning to the present of DC’s fictional characters and which was simultaneously catalogued in Who’s Who: The Definitive Directory of the DC Universe, an encyclopedia published in comics form for twenty-six issues between March 1985 and April 1987.

64. Wolfman, “Crisis Mail: Crisis Beginnings.”


67. Though not discussed in this essay, David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) has become the quintessential history of the state economic policies that, since the 1970s, have shaped the creation of the system of global capital called neoliberalism.