POPOCALYPSE NOW:
THE RISE OF THE BOY-MEN IN POP CULTURE

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

The former ideal of growing up is flawed, and for a whole generation of young men “The American Dream” didn’t pan out the way they wanted it to. For this group, which I’m dubbing “Boy-Men”, staying trapped in boyhood is the only way to maintain a sense of identity they see as their own. Superhero movies, video games, and Comic-con culture have grown astronomically popular in the past couple of years, and the age group that these areas target continues to expand from the “traditional” market of the adolescent male well into a much older demographic.

There is a zeitgeist happening where these young men continue to play the hero well into adulthood, and current trends in Pop Culture seem to confirm this. Various theories will be explored to come to an understanding as to why these stories persist within our culture, from Jungian psychology about the archetype to theories about the continuation of an oral (storytelling) culture within a literate culture.

There is a level of violence inherent in this new ideal of perpetual adolescence, with the hero constantly battling enemies to prove his worth. By placing the hero into a post-apocalyptic environment, where all order has broken
down, this violence is further exploited to show that for all the posturing about the return, the climax, of the hero, the hero is really never allowed to stop fighting.

The Popocalypse is an alternate post-apocalyptic environ where Pop Culture has exploded, in which the adolescent fantasy of the superhero can play out and be exploited. Within the Popocalypse our hero, Atom Boy, flies around “pwning noobz” in a quintessentially heroic fashion. Through the use of over-sized weapons and serious attitude, Atom Boy is forever able to defeat his enemy, yet always seems to struggle to do so.

The body of work that encompasses the Popocalypse is presented as Atom Boy’s lair or command center. In this space one can see how a superhero, one who continually fights the good fight, lives. Atom Boy is a little rough around the edges, and the thesis body of work shows this, as well as hinting at Atom Boy’s inability to grow up and leave the Popocalypse.

The Popocalypse has begun...
CHAPTER 2:

THE RISE OF THE BOY-MEN AND PERPETUAL ADOLESCENCE IN POP CULTURE

As new generations rise to prominence, changes from the status quo are seen as negative as those accepting of and grounded within the status quo find themselves being pushed aside and made irrelevant. As Michael Kimmel states in *Manhood in America*:

The structural foundations of traditional manhood-economic independence, geographic mobility, domestic dominance- had all been eroding. The transformation of the workplace- the decline of the skilled worker, global corporate relocations, the malaise of the middle class manager...-pressed men to confront their continued reliance on the marketplace as the way to demonstrate and prove their manhood... Downward mobility was more common than upward mobility for Americans in their twenties. Most Americans born in the suburbs in the 1950’s and 1960’s never earned enough to afford to buy the houses they grew up in. It now took two incomes to provide the same standard of living that one income provided less than two generations ago. This generation would be the first in U.S. history that would leave its children poorer than itself. (Kimmel 217)

Admittedly dated and aimed at men, Kimmel shows that the decline of the American Dream that promised stability has been a lie for a while now. One can’t grow up and assume that there will be a job waiting for them. It’s a continuous battle to better oneself and prove that one is worthwhile to exist within society, yet the rewards for this battle seem banal in comparison with the rewards of the trials of the hero.

One artist who deals heavily with ideals of masculinity within a contemporary context is Matthew Barney. In his work *The Cremaster Cycle*, Matthew
Barney exploits masculinity in an extremely over the top fashion, using sculpture, photos, video and performance in an incredibly intricate narrative, pushing his body physically in various disconcerting efforts to “prove” his masculinity. Of particular interest to me as an artist are the narrative he creates and the characters that populate this narrative, and his format for displaying his costuming is something I looked at heavily in creating my own mythos, my own character. While I only created one character around which my mythos rotates, I feel there is a kinship to Barney in how we created these characters, which will be discussed more in the chapter on the Popocalypse.
Figure 2.1: Matthew Barney, *Cremaster Cycle 3*, documentation photograph, 2002
Figure 2.2: Atom Boy Front View, documentation photograph, 2013
I grew up thinking that my purpose was to get a stable job, raise a family, work 9 to 5, in other words “grow up,” but the falsehood of this statement was unknown to me. As a child growing up I didn't realize the ideal being pushed on me by older generations was false, or that there was more than one path to achieve adulthood. I assumed that I would eventually outgrow my childish pursuits, and that my desire for those things would go away; that the worlds I created, the cartoons I appreciated for their inherent “truth,” the robots and gun-toting vehicles I drew would get absorbed and developed into something more mature. According to my more “enlightened” elders, living in a fantasy was a lie, but maybe the truth of fantasy is all that there is.

It wasn’t until years later that I came to understand that I wasn’t the only one who felt this way, that a whole generation of young men are growing up who refuse to shed their immature fantasies. Where once this type of behavior was deemed subversive and negative, the current outpouring of support for more “nerd” inspired endeavors in the Pop Culture field supports this changing trend. In his book *Comic-Con and the Business of Pop Culture*, Rob Salkowitz explains the current popularity of Comic-Con:

Comics are big business. Their unique style and subject matter power Hollywood blockbusters and *New York Times* bestsellers. Scan the lists of all-time box office champions, all-time best selling video games, top-rated TV shows, and best-trafficked blogs and websites. Comics are all over them... just look at Comic-Con International San Diego, the sprawling pop culture festival that takes over San Diego for a week every July and contributes an estimated $163 million to the local economy. Comic-Con draws upwards of 130,000 people
(more by some estimates) and sells out almost instantly, with millions more following the proceedings online or through news reports. (Salkowitz 3)

Comic-Con is a festival littered with “childish” fantasies frequented almost exclusively by grown ups, and is hailed as a Mecca for scifi and fantasy enthusiasts. Where it was once a small gathering for purists dedicated to the medium of comic books, it has become a sounding board for everything that is new to come, in media ranging from film, TV, video games, etc. Hollywood has taken a huge shine to Comic-Con, as Salkowitz states:

130,000 pop culture fanatics to market to, all in one place, teeming with press. What’s not to like? The advent of social media has only accelerated and amplified the effect that studios hope to achieve: word-of-mouth buzz from trusted, authoritative, and authentic voices, urging their millions of Facebook friends, Twitter followers, blog readers, and online gaming partners to check out this amazingly awesome new thing they saw at the coolest event in the freakin’ universe, Comic-Con! (Salkowitz 106)

By having an understanding of the way the Millennial generation receives its information as well as its wants, Comic-Con and Hollywood have started tying themselves in to the dialogue happening within this new generation. This is a generation that wants to stay at play, that doesn’t want to grow up, that is throwing off the trappings of our past in an attempt to blaze a new path forward that will allow us to find our own meaning. The Boy-Men are retreating into their fantasies, yes, but there is a movement happening where everyone is retreating into their fantasies, where we are living our lives by acting out our dreams, by staying perpetually at play. A zeitgeist is forming around this new meaning of “growing up,” where the trappings of our youth are no longer mere childish past-times, they can become empowering in ways we didn’t think were possible. This flourish in comics
related Pop Culture is furthering the idea that new meaning can be found in these childish pastimes.

Another artist who is investigating perpetual adolescence and how it manifests in Pop Culture is Takashi Murakami. Murakami investigates the Otaku culture/lifestyle as it manifests in Japan, a culture similar to fanboy culture in America. Murakami describes himself as a “failed” otaku, as he can relate to the joy experienced by the culture but isn’t so invested in the culture that he can’t see the problems in the culture. Murakami describes his work as Superflat, which he sees as an analogy to the way that Japanese culture was squashed after WWII by the Americans instituting a puppet government, essentially causing a whole generation in Japan not to grow up. This group stays continually at play, and has let their fantasies become their entire lives. Murakami takes the playful and discursive elements found in anime and manga and exploits them in his paintings and sculptures, providing an outside look into a world dominated by a youthful mentality. It’s Murakami’s playful take on these aspects of Japanese Otaku culture that I appreciate the most, as the humor in his work drives his point home. While Murakami reads the flattening of his generation and their inability to escape perpetual adolescence as a negative, I will illustrate how, for my generation, this perpetual adolescence can be empowering.
Figure 2.3: Takashi Murakami, *My Lonesome Cowboy*, 1998
The idea of staying trapped in a fantasy was for a long time sold to me as a bad thing by older generations, that one was supposed to outgrow these fantasies to become a functioning member of society. The idea that one could stay trapped inside of a heroic fantasy for their entire lives seemed to terrify people, the concern being that the person trapped in the fantasy wouldn’t be able to distinguish the real from the fantastical, and would allow the violence of the fantasy to leak out into the real world. This has always irked me personally, as this idea implies that the reader of said material, the person inside the fantasy, has no idea that it IS a fantasy, and that’s debatable in the extreme. The new move of this culture to stay trapped in the fantasy seems to justify this, as they don’t really want to participate in the real world, thereby negating the concern of their fantastical yearnings being enacted in the real world. Every time a new Grand Theft Auto, a new Halo, really any new violent video game comes out, protests pour out at the violence being portrayed, without anyone giving a thought to the fact that the player of said game has enough common sense to appreciate what is happening in the fantasy without bringing it into the real world.

Using an idea found in a discussion of another sub-culture, death metal, I can start to form a basis for discussing a perpetual fantasy that negates the aforementioned concerns, and empowers the reader through his fantasy (or listener, as is the case with death metal). Death metal, much like comic book culture, has always been looked at with a negative lens, particularly in regards to the violence inherent in the lyrics and sonic qualities. One only has to recall the several
times Metal musicians have been cited as inciting suicide and murder, as well as look up how many Cannibal Corpse albums have been banned due to the graphic nature of their cover art, to understand the extent of the concern over this culture. In her book *Death Metal and Music Criticism*, Michelle Phillipov quotes another writer about his ideas on death metal’s political limitations:

Kahn-Harris (2007) argues that the potential for political resistance among metal fans is limited by what he calls practices of “reflexive anti-reflexivity.” “Reflexive anti-reflexivity” refers to metal scene members’ deliberate refusal to interrogate the political implications of the music they produce and consume. As Kahn-Harris explains, if *un*reflexivity is “not knowing better,” and *anti*-reflexivity is “not wanting to know,” *reflexive* anti-reflexivity is “knowing better but deciding not to know.”(emphasis in original) (Phillipov 58)

While Kahn-Harris presents this as a negative, Phillipov proceeds to take this negative connotation throughout the rest of her book and flip it on its head, to insist that this is a conscious act on the part of the metal listener. The act of distancing themselves from the violence and gory imagery represented in the music is part of what empowers the listener. To be able to appreciate the message of the work, without taking it so seriously to heart as to actually go out and commit acts of violence on other people, is all a part of the appreciation of this style of music.

Reflexive anti-reflexivity applied to Pop Culture of the superhero, video game, and comic book persuasion allows us to examine this culture in a new light without the concerns presented earlier. A new appreciation for the intricacies and interesting aspects of comic book culture can be cultivated if it’s understood that the person appreciating and participating in comic book culture isn’t going to go out and
manifest violence in the real world. The perpetuation of the fantasy allows for a new sense of identity to be formed.
CHAPTER 3:

SUPERHERO, MYTH, AND POP CULTURE

The romantic hero is unconnected. He belongs to no community; he is wandering from place to place, doing good (as he sees it), but then moving on. This is the life of the adolescent, full of passion, intensity, magic, and infinite possibility; but lacking responsibility, rarely expecting to have to stay and bear the consequences of error. Everything is played at twice the speed and twice the volume in the adolescent- the romantic- life.” (Card 198)

The idea of the romantic, or super, hero’s journey mimicking the trials of youth started my investigations into why Pop Culture focuses so much on super-heroic narratives. Up until this point I had always assumed it was just an innate understanding that super-heroic narratives were an ingrained part of our culture, that fast-paced, adrenaline packed movies, video games, and comic books were somehow as much a part of some overarching American identity as the stereotypical baseball and apple pie. The idea of the hero story mirroring the trials of youth lends itself well to an understanding of why adults see these stories as childish, why one must grow out of these stories. One must settle down, stop wandering, stop trying to do right and settle beefs, one must “grow-up” out of these childish yearnings. Yet these stories persist, and we still praise and have need for our heroes. There are several ways that hero stories perpetuate in our culture, and a couple of ways to understand how that is impactful to a new idea of growing up.
One of the most common ways Superhero stories and contemporary hero narratives are described as continuations of epic narratives found in our past. In *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell breaks the hero story down into 3 basic storytelling devices: the Departure, the Initiation, and the Return. He goes on to define how each of these different aspects work: how the hero is excised from his community, and the only way to return is after he has redeemed himself; How the hero must go through trials, pain, torture, and achieve revelation; and how, after achieving this revelation, he may return home to reclaim what is rightfully his, be it a life of peace and quiet, a kingdom, or a former lover. (Joseph Campbell 49, 97, 193)

This formula is loose enough that, except for minor differences, it can be applied to almost every heroic narrative out there. In the introduction to his book, *Superheroes and Gods: A Comparative study from Babylonia to Batman*, Author Don LoCicero states:

Achilles and Superman, Rustam and Captain Marvel, the Hulk and the Frankenstein being, Odysseus and James Bond- all are essentially blood brothers, their shared essence derived from a wellspring of motifs that the Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung designated with the term *archetypes*... Jung postulates the existence of a collective unconscious quite separate from the personal unconscious made famous by Sigmund Freud. He explains that while the personal unconscious was at one time a part of an individual’s conscious state, for one reason or another its contents are forgotten or repressed with passing time. On the other hand, the collective unconscious was never part of any individual consciousness, but an inherent attribute, ‘a psychic system of a collective, universal and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals.’ This inherited psychic system consists of preexistent forms or, as he calls them, *archetypes*. (LoCicero 5)

LoCicero goes on to further this point by drawing direct correlations between varying past heroes and gods and the superheroes of today, using the type of
archetypal logic put forth by Carl Jung. While both of these works offer us an understanding of the persistence of the hero story within our culture, they are lacking in giving us an understanding of how the hero story is a reflection of the trials of youth, and how these stories work in a postmodern world.

In *The Meaning of Superhero Comic Books*, Terrence R. Wandtke explains:

While the superhero’s status as myth and/or commodity might be the driver for its vibrancy, the simplistic reason the superhero seems as vibrant as ever is due to the fact that Spider-Man hardly ever looks a day over 20 and only rarely makes it beyond high school. For the most part, these superheroes are drawn with a youthful appearance in comic books, played by young actors on film, and written as barely adults within Internet fanfiction. Each generation wants to claim particular superheroes as their own and clothe them with the trappings of their era, but the collective impulse is to keep them outside the ravages of time (or at least to broaden industrial age notions of time that might trap superheroes within a single timeline). (Wandtke 7)

In a later chapter, Wandtke elaborates upon this notion and gives a potential reason as to why and how this happens:

My intention is to describe comic books not as a primitive form of high literature but as something other than a product of literate culture... More importantly, the characterization of this genre as something shaped by an oral sensibility helps to explain the general sentiment against it, going beyond the now cliché characterizations of comic books as kids’ stuff or shockingly new... the scholarship of orality, oral tradition, and oral culture offers the best possibility of reorienting this field of study in a way that accounts for its problems and provides a means for understanding the field in a fuller light. The connections now being drawn between oral culture and digital culture suggests that the comic book superhero represents a paradigm shift in contemporary culture. (Wandtke 29)

The idea that comic books, a literate medium with a visual component, being not a product of a literate culture, but the continuation of the storytelling models
presented within oral tradition, helps to explain how superheroes can maintain perpetual adolescence within a postmodern age. Wandtke goes on in his book to elaborate upon Ong’s theory of a New Orality, and how the Internet age is ushering this in. This idea of the superhero representing perpetual youth holds a lot of credence for me personally, as it helps to explain my fascination with the superhero and super-heroic storytelling. This also explains why the hero seems to come under fire from older generations once they’re no longer “allowed” to participate in the fantasy, and their superheroes get recycled for the next generation. The idea of the hero being a perpetuation of an oral tradition, with the most recent version of the story being the most important and relevant, allows for new and interesting ways to go about developing story, particularly the story of Atom Boy, which is mutable and not completely defined.

Wandtke elaborates on how this idea of an oral tradition within a literate culture was initially received by comic book fans:

Interested in the development of heroic narratives within contemporary culture, I became fascinated by the appropriation and revision of the superhero story throughout the relatively short span of its history. Since the superhero remained at the forefront of many forms of discourse, these revisions, sometimes subtle and sometimes radical, have profound social implications and I explored this most notably in a collection that I edited entitled *The Amazing Transforming Superhero*... upon discovering that I analyzed the implications of revisions to the superhero over the course of time, (critics outside my field) would bypass the idea that there were implications to address in the aforementioned revisions; in turn, those many people would, in tones ranging from bewildered to derisive, flatly state that the fact that the superhero has been revised is painfully obvious... trying to determine their likely expectations for narrative storytelling, I initially situated them in the context of the literate world- a context that
requires of everyone some knowledge of original sources for a person to feel confident in any authoritative statement. (Wandtke 8)

This demonstrates that the reading audience of comic books weren’t, in fact, reading comic books with an understanding that they were part of some type of traditional historic canon, they were reading them with an understanding that the story can morph and change perpetually without any type of integrity lost.

To give a personal example, at the same time that I was watching Smallville, A Superman live-action continuity that blended several different comic book story lines into a new story, I was also watching Young Justice, a cartoon derived from Justice League and Teen Titan Continuity, yet not entirely in line with either, in which Superboy is a lead character, while Superman exists in an off camera sense. Recently, the Man of Steel Movie came out, which differs from both of these shows entirely. In an oral tradition, this type of storytelling can make perfect sense, seeing as the newest retelling of the story is the most contemporary, the most important, and also the most true.

I personally experienced the conundrum Wandtke runs into about superhero narrative, when mentioning my artwork to a friend. As soon as I mentioned that I was bridging the gap between perpetual adolescence and the hero story, his reaction was blaise at best, aka, “oh yeah, of course.” What had seemed such a revelation to me had, in one sentence, been relegated to the realm of banality. I was at first worried that the idea wasn’t strong enough, but then came to the realization
that his reaction was the reaction of our generation, the Millennial generation. We are so inundated with new thoughts, new ideas, and have been so trained to have an understanding that no thought or idea comes without a level of baggage, that nothing is black or white, that every correlation and idea makes sense to us in some way. In other words, it didn’t mean the death knell of my work, if anything it garnered, for me, a new appreciation of its importance.

So far I have discussed superheroes, as they’ve been understood in an American/Eurocentric ideology, where the hero is portrayed in as human an aspect as possible. This is not always the case for other cultures. Crispin Freeman, a voice actor for numerous comic book inspired animated films and anime, comments:

In Japan...the traditional concept of god comes from Shinto, the indigenous, animistic, and polytheistic religion of Japan. In Shinto, the concept of god or kami is much more malleable. The Sun, Mount Fuji, and other natural phenomenon are worshipped as kami... in anime, the giant robot comes from this more protean and elemental notion of divine energy. Supernatural power can manifest itself in a mechanical form that may be humanoid in shape and may even demonstrate some human qualities, but it is certainly not human. It is the personification of a divine force that is elemental in nature... For me, superheroes... are manifestations of Abrahamic ideals and values. (Lunning 277)

In this interview Freeman is discussing how these different ideas about religion affect how he chooses to portray different characters, be they giant robot pilots or superheroes. Having grown up watching giant robot anime alongside of superhero cartoons, the idea of religion being at the heart of variations within the hero story struck a cord with me. As a kid watching Power Rangers and Gundam Wing, I experienced the same appreciation for these works as I did for American superhero
stories, and derived similar satisfaction from watching the giant robot beat the bad
guys. I bring this up in particular as the video for my thesis, Tokusetsu Kaiju Battle,
references the tradition of Japanese live action special effects (Tokusetsu), in an
attempt to pay homage to the storytelling style of giant fighting robots that I grew
up with. This piece also has a lot of post modern, breaking-the-4th-wall elements at
play, since it is obviously shot against a green screen, but the characters involved
ignore that fact as they battle. I felt it was important to keep a connection to
Japanese culture, as my undergraduate work focused on the idea of the god child as
the pilot of giant robots. This piece also bridges the gap between Takashi
Murakami’s work about the Otaku lifestyle, the failure of a Japanese generation to
grow up, and the Popocalypse.

Whereas Murakami feels that his generation’s perpetual adolescence is a
failure, I personally feel it can be empowering. If the superhero mythos can be said
to be analogous to the trials of growing up, then maybe growing up with an
appreciation of superhero values and ideals is a new approach to the idea of
growing up.
Figure 3.1: Tokusetsu Kaiju Battle, film still, 2014

Figure 3.2: Tokusetsu Kaiju Battle, film still, 2014
CHAPTER 4:
APOCALYPTIC ENVIRON AND REBIRTH

John W. Nelson stated that “apocalyptic is as American as the hot dog.” (Susan J. Napier 250) This can be confirmed in American Pop Culture with the plethora of movies that deal with this subject. Starting with the Mad Max films and continuing today with the plethora of zombie movies like Day of the Dead and 28 Days Later, monster movies like Pacific Rim and Godzilla, and action films Like Dredd and the Hunger Games, apocalyptic visions in cinema and elsewhere abound.

Apocalypse has become such an ingrained part of our American psyche that it doesn’t even register that it’s happening. It has become expected for any new action film to have some level of apocalypse involved, since it is such a powerful and convenient backdrop to brace the action against, almost to the point of becoming cliché. The idea that everything has broken down, that society has collapsed, that all formal institutions are gone allows for a freedom that doesn’t exist in the real world, allows for a hero to be born, allows any human left to find their inner hero. It’s the perfect environment to form a hero, because there are always people to be saved, and in addition to whatever bad guys exist, the very environment is out to get you.

In Anime: From Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle, Author Susan J. Napier offers us insight into the appeal of apocalypse:
Cathartic destruction, often related to revenge fantasies, is the most basic element of traditional apocalypse, allowing the viewer/reader the pleasure of watching the end of evil or danger and experiencing its final transcendence in surrogate fashion... in contemporary texts the destruction of evil is less important than simply destruction itself, the 'pleasures of making a mess,'... Akira's devastating ending leaves us finally with the ultimate contemporary spectacle, the 'obscene ecstasy of alienation,' to use cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard’s phrase. Yet it seems legitimate that contemporary viewers experience catharsis as much with Akira as with the more traditional (apocalyptically speaking) Nausicaa (of the Valley of the Wind). (Napier 263)

This idea of “cathartic destruction” helps explain why the public is so invested in the idea of apocalypse, the idea of everything getting blown away and getting to start over from nothing, to rebuild society as one sees fit, to be a loner or leader, to take the vestiges of something that was once great, the leftovers, and start again, seems to ring true for a lot of people. For younger people looking to form their own identity, to be able to completely throw off the shackles placed upon us by a system that they didn’t create, that doesn’t really support us in the way it claims, to have to submit to a larger system and conform to fit in, this blank slate environment of apocalypse seems to hold a lot of promise, if only in our fantasies.

There is a group of artists working out in the desert that deal almost exclusively with apocalyptic vision. Survival Research Labs, or SRL, is a collection of artists, engineers, and generally crazy individuals that build massive, obnoxious, gross constructs out in the California desert, and do massive performance pieces, where these machines interact with each other in extremely violent fashion. These pieces speak extremely well to a punk rock, apocalypse aesthetic as the machines they create are not pretty, rarely are painted or finished in any way, and are often
loud and in your face. The performances ride the line of art and pure spectacle, as they are so over the top as to be said to mirror or reflect forms of popular low-brow entertainment, such as drift racing or monster truck events. The creative energies behind the works is, however, something that I am drawn to and relate to, and I attempt to capture in my art practice.
Figure 4.1: Survival Research Labs, video still, 2014

Figure 4.2: Distrashterpiece Music Video, video still, 2014
CHAPTER 5:
THE POPOCALYPSE AND THE STORY OF ATOM BOY

Superhero stories are inherently over the top, full of bombast and splendor. The whole point of a good superhero story is to be flashy enough to put itself ahead of all the rest, to be the top story by being the most incredible, having the most high flying action, bringing together the most powerful heroes and the best super-villains and having them hash out their differences with lots of punching and flying through buildings. It is this need to constantly be over the top and be the most fantastical that is exploited the most in my conceptualization and incarnation of the Popocalypse and Atom Boy. Atom Boy is a caricature, a reflection, a foil to the contemporary superhero. Everything he does is over the top, all his weapons he scavenges together are freakin’ huge, and it is the irony of their scale that makes it effective (and funny), and allows for a little tongue-in-cheek humor to overtly shine through. While Atom Boy is, generally speaking, a superhero, he’s not very good at it. His failure to be as awesome as he thinks he is pokes fun at the idea of not being able to grow up. While the superhero fantasy is aligned with this idea of growing up, it’s always been kind if ironic how, even though we know the hero is going to win in the end, he still gets his ass kicked up until that point. I relate this to the desire of the viewer to see their own struggles reflected in our heroes, to see the comparison made between the mundane struggles of our everyday world and the fantastic.
struggles of the superhero. In addition, I surmise that this is ALL the viewer wants to see, that the idea of a “return” isn’t nearly as enticing at the Initiation or trials phase of the hero story. So in the story of Atom Boy, we have a hero trapped in perpetual adolescence. In a decidedly self-aware postmodern move, Atom Boy is forever caught in a struggle against an enemy that is not all that impressive. Atom Boy’s main enemies are noobz, faceless, relatively simple opponents to beat that should not require even a modicum of Atom Boy’s attention, particularly if he is so badass. Yet Atom Boy still feels the need to don his outfit, go out and fight, and forge new weapons, even though there is no end goal in sight. In essence, his role as a superhero has become his job, the quintessential “struggle” that he deals with is his 9-5, monotonous job. It’s this ironic twist that creates a lot of the humor of the Popocalypse and Atom Boy.

The idea of Noobz spawns from video game slang, where everyone who is not up to par as far as the rules of the game are concerned get *pwn’d*, yet another gamer slang that is a mistype of own. The reason Noobz are Atom Boys main enemies is because all of the bad guys and villains in superhero stories are noobz. We all know, in the end, that Superman is going to beat Lex Luthor, that Batman is going to incarcerate the Joker, and the X-Men are going to defeat Magneto, that all of the nefarious schemes of these bad guys will inevitably be foiled. I have depersonalized the villain, and given it a blank face, as no matter what, in the end, Atom Boy will perpetually pwn them. The other facet of this is that while Atom Boy is surrounded by noobz, he is the only character who has any understanding of self or the reality
he lives in. This is a tongue-in-cheek, postmodern crack against all comic book and gaming nerds, where everyone not “the know” is a total noob. I extend this to the Popolcapypse, as anyone not in the “know” about the Popocalypse, aka everyone besides myself, is a noob. So in essence, everyone’s a noob, and when Atom Boy pwn’s you, you become self-aware, and aren’t a noob anymore, but then you also leave the Popocalypse, as you transcend to another plane (or retreat back to IRL.)

The world of the Popocalypse has much of your traditional post-apocalyptic fare. A blasted wasteland, desiccated cityscapes, a missing populace, and random detritus comprise a familiar enough setting for us to immediately understand that the Popocalypse is post-apocalyptic. The differences surface when we realize that the blasted landscape is composed of foam rocks, glitter, and pink sand; the cityscapes are the cities of fantasy (Metropolis, Gotham, etc); the populace is not missing so much as it has been transformed into noobz (the popocalyptic equivalent of zombies); and the detritus are a selection of random parts from movies, video games, and comic books, essentially comprising a landscape that can be mined for far more interesting, new combinations of items than have been seen before in apocalyptic visions, to humorous effect. This explains why Atom Boy can have a four barrel shotgun that shoots yoshi egg shotgun shells, as well as a supercharged minigun pistol that shoots lightsabers, as well as a jetpack with a spiked shoulder pad and a power fist, as well as having a giant oversized hammer powered by rockets. It is this explosion of Pop Culture that allows for these items to be created, that allows for these items to all exist in the same environment, to be combined in
new and interesting ways. The sky of the Popocalypse shifts and changes, much like a set would, with the sky alternating between the static-like glow of a dead television and the off-putting glow of a green screen.

The origin story of Atom Boy is malleable, as it has been *retconned* several times within the world of the Popocalypse. *Retconning* is what happens in comic books when a new discontinuity comes into play that disagrees with a previous origin story, and the company *retcons* (retires the continuity) the old story line. Using the ideas presented earlier of an oral tradition existing within a literate culture, I’ve pulled this postmodern move with the story of Atom Boy, allowing for discontinuities in his story/history. He has been the son of iRa, the sun god, sent down to fight against the agents of his brother, iJob (this version is presented in the Atom Boy theme song); he is a transplant from Japan, and is an updated version of Astro Boy, the first anime to come to America (providing a different read for his attire and his disdain for everything in the Popocalypse); in an alternate *Brave New World* scenario he ran for World Controller, and lost (thereby being sent to the Popocalypse); he has also been both a creation of the Popocalypse itself, much like Swamp Thing, to protect and embody the ideas of the Popocalypse, as well as having been a part of the Atom Boy Corp, a group of supercommandos sent down by the Institute of Radical Action, or IRA, from outer space to fight in the Snooki-Booboo wars, and he got marooned on Earth and continues the fight of the Popocalypse, with no hope of rescue. We tend to catch Atom Boy toward the middle of each of these scenarios, where he has spent enough time in the Popocalypse to become
jaded with it, but he’s still out there kicking ass, because that’s what he does-forever. “ATOM BOY, He’ll save every one of us! ATOM BOY, Savior of the Popocalypse!” (Chorus of the theme song)

The body of work that encompasses the Popocalypse uses a transmedia approach to engage the viewer on several levels. There is found object sculpture, fully fabricated-from-scratch art objects, 3d modeled, CNC-ed objects, installation art, sound and video components. All of these elements have come together in the form of Atom Boy’s command center, or lair. The articles that compose the final piece, titled Distrashterpiece, are all interlaced, either with the objects being used in the videos to further the story or the story relating how different aspects of the lair relate. In Tokusetsu Kaiju Battle, we see the command center being utilized by Atom Boy as he rides around inside of the Giant Atom Boy Mecha Go-Go, as well as the Lightknife being tossed to Atom Boy in this same video. Both of these objects exist within the installation. In the Music video, also titled Distrashterpiece, we see Atom Boy driving around in his Atom Kart, as well as swinging the Lil’ Slaggertron 5000 around, in time to the music video playing on top, which tells how awesome Atom Boy is, and how sweet all of his Equipmunk is. By creating layers in this fashion, I am attempting to draw the viewer further into the Popocalypse, and enlighten them, so that they can stop being noobz.
Figure 5.1: Distrashterpiece, installation view, 2014
Figure 5.2: Equipmunk Rack, Distrashterpiece installation view, 2014

Figure 5.3: Atom Suit, Distrashterpiece installation view, 2014
CHAPTER 6:
CONCLUSION

We sought the origins of the malaise surrounding growing up. Starting with the decline of the stereotypical grown-up ideal that surrounded me during my youth, we explored how the definition of manhood pales in comparison to the strength that can be found in perpetual youth in the form of the Boy-Men Zeitgeist. We examined how the trials of growing up and the trials of the superhero share a common thread, and why these types of action-oriented stories perpetuate. We also explored how the idea of apocalypse created a blank slate upon which to project the fantasies of this culture, in which the lack of rules allows for a new ideal of growing up to be explored. The Popocalypse and Atom Boy embody this new tragically epic ideal, as Atom Boy continues in his endless struggle, if only it seems for the joy of the fight, as there is no end in sight for the plight of Atom Boy.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


