

ASSEMBLING NEW AVENGERS: THE SUCCESSFUL COMIC-BOOK  
SUPERHERO FILM IN POSTMILLENNIAL HOLLYWOOD

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A THESIS SUBMITTED

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2012

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Associate Professor John Phillips for being intellectually generous and unflaggingly encouraging while I wrote this thesis.

To Dr. Lisa Bode and Dr. Jane Stadler. Without your excellent teaching skills and invaluable essay feedback, I would never have switched to a film major back in my second year of undergrad.

To Gregory Cai, Aaron Choo, Dawn Teo, Priscilla Tham, and Zhang Kangyi. May there be more convivial laughter, more merry wandering, and more first-rate cook-out sessions in the years to come.

To my parents, for their unstinting love, and for putting up with the intermittent tides of books on the study room floor.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how comic-book superhero films such as *The Avengers*, *Thor*, *Captain America*, *Iron Man*, and *X-Men: First Class* are functioning successfully within postmillennial Hollywood. Much scholarship on the superhero idiom already exists, and this thesis builds upon — and then departs from — this work. In particular, it analyzes comic-book superhero films as cultural artefacts produced within a mediascape dominated by the interlinked triple ethea of convergence culture, hyper-spectatorship, and franchise-building. Such an analysis thus not only sheds light upon the changed demands and expectations of media consumers during this era, but also upon the updated strategies which media producers have deployed to meet these expectations. This thesis accordingly finds that successful comic-book superhero films present as important structuring texts for their respective overall franchises, and that utopian views of convergence culture as emancipatory and the hyper-spectator as powerful are problematic when one considers the success and prevalence of these comic-book superhero film franchises. Rather, the advent of convergence culture and the dominance of the hyper-spectator have afforded media producers new challenges and platforms against which to systematically instrumentalize the affection and autonomy of media audiences.

## Introduction

*The atomized or serial “public” of mass culture wants to see the same thing over and over again, hence the urgency of the generic structure and the generic signal... This situation has important consequences for the analysis of mass culture which have not yet been fully appreciated* — Fredric Jameson, *Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture*, 1979

To paraphrase the tagline for *Superman* (Donner 1978), it is easy for one to believe that a man can fly these days, not least when one is at the movies. Where superhero films were sporadically produced during the two decades which followed *Superman*, the genre has enjoyed a renaissance ever since the critical and commercial success of *X-Men* (Singer 2000) and *Spider-Man* (Raimi 2002), which were both based on established flagship characters from the major superhero comic-book publisher Marvel Comics. The postmillennial cineplex is marked by the continuing popularity and production of superhero films, so much so that the upcoming *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012) will be able to feature Marvel superheroes who have already appeared separately in no less than five other superhero films over the past four years. Further, where superhero films are sometimes modestly budgeted by contemporary standards — the movie industry tracker website The Numbers lists *Kick-Ass* (Vaughn 2010) and *Jonah Hex* (Hayward 2010) as costing US\$ 28 million and US\$ 47 million to produce respectively — most postmillennial superhero films are conceived as holiday tentpole blockbusters. (n.p.) They have immense production and marketing budgets, are projects which their producers anticipate as being hugely profitable, and are widely distributed and released during the historically peak cinema attendance periods of summer and winter. In summer 2011 alone, three films which were (once again) based on Marvel superheroes — *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston 2011), *Thor* (Branagh 2011), and *X-Men: First Class* (Vaughn 2011) — cost their producers between US\$ 140 million to US\$ 160 million each, and all grossed more than double this amount at the box office. (The Numbers n.p.)

This thesis, accordingly, uses these latter three films, as well as *The Avengers* and *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008), as case studies which examine how comic-book superhero movies function successfully within postmillennial Hollywood. As popular artefacts which are produced within a culturally central media industry, these films are worthy of critical analysis. Such an analysis promises to shed light upon the changed demands and expectations of media consumers during this era, and also upon the updated strategies which media producers have deployed to meet these expectations.

This thesis's case studies, it should be noted, all feature Marvel Comics's superheroes. This might initially seem to be doing intellectual violence to superheroes owned by different producers, such as those owned by Marvel's perennial rival DC Comics, or alternatively by small publishing houses like Dark Horse Comics. I argue, though, that this Marvel-centric focus not only reflects that Marvel has historically been one of the world's largest producers of superhero media, but also that Marvel has been the trendsetter during the current superhero film renaissance. Where DC Comics was relatively active during the 1990s with its occasional Batman films, its initial entries in this renaissance, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Norrington 2003) and *Catwoman* (Pitof 2004), were only released a few years after *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*. *Batman Begins* (Nolan 2005), which featured DC's own flagship Batman character, was only released after both *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* had spawned sequels, with sequels to these sequels already at the planning stage. Further, *Batman Begins*'s retention of Christian Bale as Batman in its sequels suggests that it is mimicking the successful formula established by *Spider-Man*, where the franchise's producers kept Tobey Maguire as Spider-Man up until the end of the trilogy. By contrast, while Christopher Reeves always played Superman — DC's other flagship character — in the late 70s-early 80s Superman tetralogy, three different actors played Batman in the four major Batman films released between 1989 and 1997. This thesis's concentration on films involving the

historically trendsetting Marvel character-properties, thus, affords it an added anticipatory slant, where it will serve as a base for future scholarly work regarding the changes that the superhero film-artefact will undergo following this particular postmillennial moment.<sup>1</sup>

There, afterall, has been no consideration of the changing nature of the superhero film within this ongoing renaissance as of the writing of this thesis. It is easy and tempting to lump all superhero films released in the decade-plus interval between *X-Men* and *Captain America* in the same broad category. They are all undeniably part of the same renaissance. But every renaissance has different stages, during which it undergoes differing degrees of transformation and revision. It is more academically sound, then, to consider post-2007 superhero films, which I demarcate as postmillennial superhero films, as originating from a distinct and different historical moment within this renaissance. Why post-2007? By the time that *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008) premiered in theatres, the media landscape had changed greatly since *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* were released. This landscape, unlike the early 2000s, was one which has been — and is currently being, and will continue to be — saturated with superhero films so much so that these films are accepted and integral parts of the summer blockbuster experience, playing to audiences more familiar with the conceits and motifs of the genre than they were in the early 2000s. Further, while both the groundbreaking *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* film trilogies had either ended — or were on the verge of ending — in 2008, *The Dark Knight* represented the establishment of a Batman trilogy which took its cues from *Spider-Man*'s successful example, and *Iron Man* represented an attempt

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<sup>1</sup> An additional note on Marvel: the company has, in the new millennium, 'shifted focus away from direct sales [of comic books] in order to target new audiences ... the general audience that sees its films.' (Johnson, "Wolverine" 74) The third-party production studios to which Marvel sold licenses to make movies and tie-in products based on *Spider-Man*, the *X-Men*, and the *Fantastic Four* had made almost US\$6 billion in total from these deals by 2007. (Leonard n.p.) Marvel, however, only made US \$100 million from selling all these licenses. (Leonard n.p.) In 2005, the company took out a US\$525 million loan to make movies based on its remaining character-properties. The dominance of Marvel superhero franchises at the postmillennial office may reflect these two industrial developments.



(eventually successful) by Marvel to produce a new film franchise in the face of the impending exhaustion of the Spider-Man and X-Men ones.

### **Superheroes and Media Convergence**

I should stress, though, that this thesis builds upon the academic work on the superhero film — and on superheroes in general — which has previously been done. This work has been vital in informing my understanding of these complicated cultural phenomena. The notion of the superhero as a relatively malleable figure and commodity, for example, is explored in works such as Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked* (2002), and in edited essay collections such as Roberta Pearson's and William Uricchio's *The Many Lives of the Batman* (1991) and Terrence Wandtke's *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!*. (2008) Wandtke sees the superhero as existing 'within a fascinating cultural dialectic ...a transhistorical presence that serves as a consistent moral reference point ...[and yet] a mutable persona subject to the passing needs of a time recorded in specific cultural histories.' (15) Brooker's work, in the same vein, notes that Batman is a multifaceted cultural icon similar to Robin Hood and the vampire, no longer 'inseparably tied to a single author ...exist[ing] somewhere about and between a multiplicity of varied and contradictory incarnations, both old and recent, across a range of cultural forms from computer games to novels.' (9) He simultaneously notes that where the key traits of a popular character are often treated as 'fluid and disposable' (Brooker 79) during the first years of its production, these traits can eventually become so key to the character's appeal that its producers may choose to place this character 'on a pedestal above the surrounding ideological tide, rather than allowing him to be immersed and shaped by it, and so risk the erosion of the brand's identifying characteristics.' (Brooker 79)

Similarly, while the general thrust of Pearson and Uricchio's collection is that 'the Batman character [and superheroes in general] can be used as a means for illuminating the

production, circulation, and reception of the media products that make up popular culture' (2), they also note that by 1990, Batman's key character traits were being strictly defined by DC Comics's in-house "batbible". Where Batman was previously a haphazardly floating signifier which had previously represented anything from 60s camp to B-movie space monster hunter, this manuscript gave DC's writers 'a profile of the character's history, attributes, and appropriate behaviour, assuring continuity despite turnover in writers.' (Pearson and Uricchio 191) In essence, while the superhero can be harnessed by producers to represent and symbolically resolve the different cultural tensions of different time periods, it remains in the best intentions of media producers to keep its 'brand identity constant through a unity of form and content across its different incarnations.' (Gordon, Jancovich, and McAllister xiii) Tales which place the superhero in appealingly non-typical adventures — Spider-Man as a billionaire avenging the death of his parents, for example — are calculatedly and clearly demarcated as alternate universe stories which ultimately serve to anchor the editorially-sanctioned truths surrounding the superhero.

Such a doubled-pronged approach by producers, which Uricchio and Pearson succinctly term a 'strategy of containment which complements [a] strategy of accommodation' (192), is useful to keep in mind when one considers the literature on the contemporary shift towards what Henry Jenkins terms "convergence culture", and then the makeup of postmillennial Hollywood, within which superhero films are an integral part, and finally the new subject formulation of the hyper-spectator.

Firstly, "convergence" 'became a buzzword in media circles' (Storsul and Stuedahl 9) during the 1990s, with media industry professionals and academics alike discussing and deconstructing the term. In these circles, Henry Jenkins is the foremost advocate for convergence culture. For him, contemporary culture is marked by an ethic of media convergence, 'where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media

intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.’ (Jenkins, “Convergence” 259-60) There is, in this culture of convergence, an ‘increased flow of content across multiple media platforms ...co-operation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want.’ (Jenkins, “Convergence” 2) A superhero film such as *Thor*, for example, originates from a Marvel comic-book, will be re-presented to audiences in numerous tie-in novels, comics, and videogames, and these media-literate audiences will be happy to perform this sort of nomadic exercise in meaning-making. Convergence culture, accordingly, is one where ‘every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms.’ (Jenkins, “Convergence” 3) This, in part, is a response to a changed conception of media consumers, where their improved access to telecommunications technologies now means that these consumers are now conceptualized as able and willing to actively ‘seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content.’ (Jenkins, “Convergence” 3)

Secondly, in an analysis of the Hollywood film industry in the early 2000s, Thomas Schatz finds that this era is significantly different from the post-1975 New Hollywood era. In this newer era, the larger media industry is dominated by six megaconglomerates (such as Time Warner) that continually absorb comparatively smaller media producers into their individual gestalts. These megaconglomerates all have film divisions which are not only efficiently integrated and cross-promoted with their other existing divisions such as television, print media, and home entertainment, but which also seek to tap upon an increased international appetite for Hollywood-produced entertainment. (Schatz, “Millennium” 20) There has correspondingly emerged ‘a new breed of blockbuster-driven franchises specifically geared to the global, digital, conglomerate-controlled marketplace, which spawn billion-dollar film

series instalments while also serving the interests of the parent conglomerate's other media and entertainment divisions.’ (Schatz, “Millennium” 20) Indeed, as Schatz finds from his taxonomy of Hollywood studio outputs and box-office receipts, the era is one where ‘with each passing year since the late 1990s, the studio's compulsive pursuit of franchise-spawning blockbusters has become more acute and more successful.’ (“Millennium” 25) If *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming 1939) had come out in this era, for example, it would have been a multi-part film series, cross-promoted by the different media channels owned by its studio’s parent megaconglomerate, and one would likely be able to buy licensed *Gone With the Wind* popcorn.

Schatz even specifically discusses the Spider-Man film trilogy as an example of these new franchise blockbusters. He notes that while its titular character was already ‘pre-sold [to audiences] by countless iterations in various media dating back to Marvel Comics’s Stan Lee in 1962’ (Schatz, “Millennium” 35), these iterations ‘did not include a live-action Hollywood film ...which meant that [its producers] Sony and Columbia could effectively re-originate the story, tailoring it to current industry conditions and their own interests.’ (Schatz, “Millennium” 35) He further considers how each film was presented to audiences as an artefact which was geared towards fostering further consumption of other artefacts not only within the Spider-Man franchise, but also within the larger sphere of products offered by the megaconglomerate. Schatz finds that for *Spider-Man 2* (Raimi 2004) , Sony’s bundling of the film and its companion videogame ‘with its new Playstation 2 system ...help[ed] it become the best-selling game console of 2005.’ (“Millennium” 36) In the case of *Spider-Man 3* (Raimi 2007), Sony's high-saturation global marketing campaign allowed the film and its ancillary products to enjoy commercial success — its combined global box-office and DVD receipts grossed over US \$1 billion in 2007 — despite the critical scorn directed towards the film’s incoherent narrative. (Schatz, “Millennium” 36-7) For Schatz, thus, the Spider-Man

superhero film trilogy is ‘a quintessential conglomerate-era media franchise’ (“Millennium” 35), one which synergistically taps upon existing audience goodwill and familiarity with its subject, and is additionally expanded in multiple ancillary products and media formats.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the rise of convergence and conglomeration has been accompanied by — and helped to foster — more media-literate audiences. In his earlier work on *The New Hollywood*, Schatz noted that the era’s audiences were now ‘far more likely to be active multiple media players, consumers, and semioticians, and thus [likely] to gauge a movie in intertextual terms and to appreciate it in its ...richness and complexity.’ (Schatz, “Hollywood” 39) In the current era, where Hollywood’s media production is dominated by the ‘compulsive pursuit of franchise-spawning blockbusters’ (Schatz, “Hollywood” 25), a new version of the spectator-figure must be called upon. If classical film theory saw spectatorship as being ‘in essence, about passive subjectification, the rise of new ways of viewing Hollywood films suggests the need for a new mind model wherein the spectatorial subject actively helps to create the simulacral world of virtual Hollywood as well as being created by it.’ (Cohen 152) For Alain Cohen, this need has led to the new subject formulation of the “hyper-spectator” dominating contemporary society:

[The hyper-spectator] can be seen both as a series of typologies (consumer spectator, cognitive spectator, artistic spectator and so on) and as a syntax of rules for the combination of these different spectatorships. He/ she/ it is both plastic and modular, sexually polymorphous and transnational, switching sex, class and anthropology at a click of prostheses -- the mouse or remote control. The hyper-spectator morphs alternately into Westerner and/ or Japanese and/ or Chinese, etc., male and/ or female and/ or child, criminal and/ or detective, or combinations thereof, according to the aesthesis of the iconophilic filmic object and especially according to the designer-spectatorship programmed and aligned by the filmic apparatus. (Cohen 160-61)

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<sup>2</sup> Schatz's analysis of the Spider-Man franchise recalls the earlier Tim Burton *Batman*, which was also harnessed by Warner Brothers to market immense amounts of money from its ancillary product tie-ins. When adjusted for inflation, however, the US \$40 million production budget for *Batman* only translates to US \$58 million in 2002, US \$60 million in 2004, and US \$66 million in 2007. In those years, each new entry in the Spiderman film trilogy was contemporarily budgeted at US \$140 million, US \$200 million, and US \$258 million. These figures support Schatz's findings regarding the increased producer support for franchises in postmillennial Hollywood.

This hyper-spectator often has extensive knowledge of the cinema, and can ‘reconfigure both the films themselves and filmic fragments into new and novel forms of both cinema and spectatorship, making use of the vastly expanded access to films arrived at through modern communications equipment and media.’ (Cohen 157) He ‘surfs’ ‘hyper-films’ (moving cross-referentially from film to film, from one director to another or from genre to genre, and into trans-national cinemas) with the same ease as we presently surf ‘hypertexts’ cross-referentially on the Net.’ (Cohen 161) In other words, the hyper-spectator is a Protean figure that is — when it comes to engaging with media texts within the society of the spectacle — highly literate, discerning, and actively engaged in the construction of meaning. He is the captain of his own (spectator)ship, able to reconfigure the ostensibly fragmented cross-platform diegesis of the blockbuster franchise into a coherent whole, and in fact take pleasure during this meaning-making process. (Cohen 162) Superhero films, with their almost fetishistic focus on narrative continuity between each associated film in the franchise, and their showcasing of characters who are already — or are hoped by producers to be — commodities and cultural icons in and of themselves, are readable as appeals to the appetites of the dominant and discriminating hyper-spectator.

Jenkins’s and Cohen’s utopian views of convergence culture as emancipatory and the hyper-spectator as powerful are problematic when one considers Schatz’s findings on the success and prevalence of film-centered multimedia franchises. Rather, the advent of convergence culture and the dominance of the hyper-spectator point to the instrumentalization of the affection and autonomy of media audiences by producers.

### **Mass Culture and Late Capitalism**

The Marxist theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer would have found such a situation untenable, though the natural course for a culture industry which sprang forth from

‘the absolute power of capitalism.’ (120) In their classic essay, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that American culture in the prosperous, post-war Jet Age, although ostensibly multilayered and idiosyncratic, was in fact stifling and uniform. (121-122) They saw the culture industry, during this profoundly capitalist era in which religion was losing its traditional efficacy as an opiate, as a large-scale strategy conceived by social elites to maintain their dominance and exploitation of the masses. For them, culture ‘now impresses the same stamp on everything, [and in particular] films, radio, and magazines make up a system which is uniform in whole and in every part.’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 120) They were especially concerned about the mass-produced performances of pseudo-individuality in the culture industry, ‘the standardized jazz improvisation to the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eyes to demonstrate her originality ...the defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show.’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 154) This concern resulted from Adorno and Horkheimer reading these performances as nothing more than surface differences which fed their audience-consumers fantasies of iconoclastic autonomy. These performances — and performers — of pseudo-individuality, as appealing points of identification and appreciation, were all ultimately meant to subsume their audience-consumers within the capitalist system as content and unquestioning subjects.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, Adorno and Horkheimer read the post-war culture industry’s efficacy as hinging upon a comfortably stupefying axis. Cultural artefacts in this milieu — especially the ones

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<sup>3</sup> The *Thor* spin-off products briefly discussed above fit within this formulation, not least because of the trilogy of junior novels which number among them. These novels — *Attack on Asgard* (Straczynski and Protosevich 2011), *Thor’s Revenge* (Rudnick 2011), and *From Asgard to Earth* (Rudnick 2011) — each cost about the same price as a cinema ticket. They each recap about a third of *Thor*, except for the concluding one, which glosses over Thor’s climatic battle with the Destroyer, and instead mentions that Thor will be in the upcoming Marvel blockbuster movie-event *The Avengers*. The quotidian subject’s affection for — and (mis)identification with — the Norse god of thunder, thus, is harnessed by producers for further profit.

which purportedly supported individuality — were cast in the comforting mould of the “already-said”, as cyclical and redundant revolutions with nothing emancipatory about them. ‘As soon as the film begins, it is quite clear how it will end, and who will be rewarded, punished, or forgotten. In light music, once the trained ear has heard the first notes of the hit song, it can guess what is coming and feel flattered when it does come.’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 125) Regarding films in particular, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that while ‘quickness, powers of observation, and experience [were] undeniably needed to apprehend them ...sustained thought [was] out of the question if the spectator [was] not to miss the relentless rush of facts.’ (126) Further, ‘those who are so absorbed by the world of the movie — by its images, gestures, and words — that they are unable to supply what really makes it a world, do not have to dwell upon particular points of its mechanics during a screening.’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 127) This regressively instinctual mode of spectatorship, thus, conceived of the spectator’s imagination as stymied, his prime — and intrinsically dissimulating — models for iconoclastic behaviour taking on a new importance for manufacturing his consent at being a dominated subject. In postmillennial Hollywood, where an aesthetic of ‘intensified continuity’ (Bordwell 120) — shorter cuts, more mobile cameras, more extreme focal lengths than in the classical Hollywood cinema mentioned by Adorno and Horkheimer — dominates, Adorno and Horkheimer’s concerns about the stupefied spectator are accordingly readable as having an anticipatory relevance.

In “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, Frederic Jameson — writing about three decades after Adorno and Horkheimer — similarly discussed the commodity fetishism that pervaded American society during his specific cultural moment. Jameson updated and expanded their argument, though, opining that capitalism had resulted in the wholesale abstraction of objects into commodities, and activities had lost ‘their inherent satisfaction as activit[es], and becom[ing] means to an end.’ (131) This conspicuous process of



commodification further extended to popular narratives as well. The best-seller, for example, was cynically geared towards providing its audiences a ‘quasi-material “feeling tone”’ (Jameson 133), with its narratives alternately providing and stymieing (so as to increase the affect of this quasi-material “feeling tone” when it was encountered) this effect. The ‘sense of destiny in family novels ...the “epic” rhythms of the earth or of great movements of “history” in various sagas’ (Jameson 133) could then be remediated profitably and convincingly; as movie or as musical score or as anything else in between.

Yet, Jameson took issue with Adorno and Horkheimer’s view ‘of mass culture as sheer manipulation, sheer commercial brainwashing, and empty distraction’ (138) by its corporate producers. He noted that the *jouissance*, for example, of sightseeing — where man would have previously been faced with the pleasurable anxious senses of his own transience and purposelessness — had morphed, in his capitalist era, into a comforting assertion of man’s dominance. ‘The American tourist no longer lets the landscape “be in its being” ...but takes a snapshot of it, thereby graphically transforming space into its own material image ...converting it into a form of personal property.’ (Jameson 131) He further discussed the cases of popular contemporary movies such as *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) and *The Godfather* (Coppola 1972), as arising from prevailing ‘social and political anxieties and fantasies ...[in order] to be “managed” or repressed.’ (141), yet ultimately providing an emancipatory function for their audiences. This was because these movies afforded their audiences brief glimpses of a better world, ‘implicitly and no matter how faintly, negative and critical of the social order from which, as a product and a commodity’ (Jameson 144) they sprang from. As a result, even if popular cultural artefacts were produced to maintain an existing social order, these artefacts needed to articulate ‘the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collective ...no matter in how distorted a fashion.’ (Jameson 144) The autonomy and ability of the individual to influence the content of — and his experience with — popular

culture under the logic of capitalism is thus given greater consideration in a Jamesonian reading.

The concurrent fact, then, that ‘the atomized or serial “public” of mass culture [of Jameson’s era] wants to see the same thing over and over again’ (Jameson 137), more so than the public of previous, pre-capitalist eras, is hence a curious one: what subjects wished for when the entirety of the culture industry was at their service was, as Jameson’s 1979 essay suggests, a repeated critique of the existing social order. This fetishization of repetition is extremely pronounced in postmillennial Hollywood. Its production is increasingly fragmented and intertextual due to its burgeoning multi-platform nature. For all that it is dominated by the discerning hyper-spectator, it is also driven by wildly popular franchise films and their attendant merchandise, among which, as Schatz’s Spider-Man case study demonstrates, include those centered around superheroes.

Jameson’s comment in *Reification and Utopia* that ‘this situation [where the public demands and demands redundancy] has important consequences for the analysis of mass culture which have not yet been fully appreciated’ (137) thus gains new relevance in the current context of postmillennial Hollywood. This thesis, then, with its examination of how popular comic-book superhero movies are functioning successfully within postmillennial Hollywood, serves as an appreciation-analysis of mass culture largely in the Jamesonian vein, linking Jameson’s work to the specificities of the current era.

I have, however, deliberately invoked both *Enlightenment as Mass Deception* and *Reification and Utopia* in this discussion to show that this success is a complicated affair. *Enlightenment as Mass Deception* is the quintessential strawman for contemporary students of media and cultural studies. It is often picked apart for its polemical stance, and its argument gives scant consideration to the idea of consumer agency and resistance. Yet, in

postmillennial Hollywood, where the franchise-commodity is now more accepted than ever, Adorno and Horkheimer's fears about producer manipulation require as much re-consideration as Jameson's notes about the autonomy of the subject to demand (and demand again) his favourite things. An enthused and critical spirit of scholarly enquiry towards popular culture is, as Jameson demonstrates, not only possible but in fact necessary. For the purposes of this project, a measure of wariness is adopted towards the calculatedly appealing collectible cultural artefacts that are produced under the aegis of the popular comic-book superhero film. Yet, this wariness ultimately twines with the understanding that the media-savvy and actively discerning hyper-spectator dominates the climate of convergence that these film-artefacts are produced within. This underlying synthesis of theories and attitudes will enable an accordingly nuanced understanding of the complicated phenomenon that is that the success of the popular comic-book superhero movie in postmillennial Hollywood.

## **Layout**

Chapter 1 of this thesis, accordingly, examines the pre-release paratextual promotional material for Marvel Studios's upcoming summer blockbuster *The Avengers* — where a motley crew which, among others, includes a god and a monster banding together to fight evil — so as to account for the immense popular anticipation surrounding it. It uses genre theory to argue that the superhero genre is not only a hybrid of pre-existing genres, but has historically also been more unstable and arbitrary than other popular genres due to its status as a genre predicated around individual characters. Secondly, it considers the importance of paratextual promotional materials in creating meaning within the franchise-dominated era that is postmillennial Hollywood. With focus given to *The Avengers*'s prerelease trailer, this section argues that a superhero is a superhero not simply because of how the character functions within its narratives, but instead because producers market it as such in its

surrounding paratexts. These paratexts are read as producer strategies that profitably address the hyper-spectator, the dominant consumer of postmillennial media texts.

Following on from Chapter 1's discussion of genre and hype, Chapter 2 draws upon the fields of celebrity studies and media industry studies to propose a two-part explanation for two trends in postmillennial superhero films such as *Captain America*, *Iron Man*, and *Thor*: firstly, that assertions of superheroic identity, textually privileged yet seemingly redundant, invariably occur in them, and secondly, that producers often cast little-known actors as the superheroic leads of these films. The chapter first reads the star narratives of these often little-known actors as appropriately synergizing with the broadly *Bildungsroman*-style, zero-to-hero plots and narratives that these films are concerned with. Where becoming a superhero is presented as the best of all possible careers in the diegetic world of these films, becoming a movie star is similarly argued to be one's highest calling within a postmodern society dominated by the spectacular rhetoric of images. Such a reading will support the second part of this chapter's findings: that this combination of producer strategies is an updating of the oneiric climate which Umberto Eco has compellingly argued to be a structural necessity for texts which operate within the superhero metagenre. These combined strategies are read as treating the superhero as a postmodern star, asserting the primacy of the character — as opposed to the actor — as the primary attraction for the present and future audiences of these franchises.

Chapter 3 is a close reading of the narrative and semiotics of *X-Men: First Class*, finding out why the film's producers choose to give a sympathetic focus to Erik Lensherr, the prelapsarian alterego of the supervillain Magneto, essentially banking on him to revitalize future instalments of the ailing X-Men film franchise as its lead character. This chapter further contextualizes *First Class* against the problematic history of the overall X-Men multimedia franchise, but also against the contemporary popularity of the Byronic hero, and

additionally against Jean-François Lyotard's concept of iconoclastic little narratives. The structural amnesia that has traditionally characterised serial storytelling is, considering that *First Class*'s simultaneously has a liminal narrative status as prequel to/ reboot of the X-Men film franchise, necessarily also reconsidered.

The three main chapters of this thesis, in sum, also allow for case studies of different aspects of the successful superhero film, during different points in its life cycle, in postmillennial Hollywood. Through this representative approach, the success of the popular comic-book superhero movie can thus be broadly accounted for.

## Chapter 1

### Earth's Mightiest Heroes: Genre Hybridity, Hype, and Pre-Viewing *The Avengers*

*The text begins before the text* — Jonathan Gray, *Television Pre-Views and the Meaning of Hype*, 2008.

At an official budget of US\$ 220 million, *The Avengers* is Marvel Studios's tentpole blockbuster release for the 2012 summer movie season. In it, cinematic iterations of existing Marvel superheroes — including the technologically-advanced Iron Man, the *femme fatale*, nominally Russian spy Black Widow, and the Norse thunder god Thor — band together to fight an evil god and his alien robot minions. The film was preceded by a long multimedia marketing campaign centred around a widely downloaded preview trailer that debuted in October 2011. (MARVEL n.p.) As of January 2012, five months before *The Avengers*'s May release date, 98% of users at the major review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes already 'want[ed] to see' (n.p.) the film. Concordantly, as of early May 2012, *The Avengers* is already one of the most financially profitable films ever. After playing to international audiences for one-and-a-half weeks, and to North American audiences for a weekend, it has already grossed over US\$648 million — US\$ 448 million internationally, and US\$ 200 million in North America — in total global box-office receipts. (The Numbers n.p.) It, in fact, holds the record for the highest opening weekend ever in various countries; in North America, particularly, its US\$ 200 million opening beat the previous record-holder's amount — *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* (Yates 2011) — by a massive US \$31 million.

What does such immense popular anticipation — and the correspondingly enthused rush — to see this motley crew of *Avengers* say about superheroes and the superhero genre, and about how the discerning, media-literate hyper-spectator of the postmillennial Hollywood system can be successfully marketed to? In answer to these interlinked questions, this chapter first

interrogates existing scholarly definitions of the superhero not only against theories of genre, but also against Gerard Genette's notion of paratexts. It argues that the superhero, in fact, belongs to a metagenre that has traditionally operated on a strategy of appropriation and persuasion, in which its producers have indiscriminately re-presented to audiences stock characters from other genres of adventure fiction as superheroes, and have additionally made great use of promotional paratexts to convince these audiences that such appropriations are well within the bounds of the superhero metagenre's generic verisimilitude. The rhetorical messages of *The Avengers*'s trailer are decoded as well, and are subsequently considered with regards to Jonathan Grey's findings regarding the importance of hype in creating meaning during the postmillennial Hollywood era. As such, this chapter finds that the trailer is in the vein of previous promotional superhero paratexts, but further works within a larger system of promotional hype such that the lacunae in information which it tantalizingly provides can be authoritatively and easily filled by other producer-sanctioned paratexts. This increases the rhetorical affect of the trailer, since the form and content of these (para)texts also simultaneously cater to the media-literate hyper-spectator's obsessively autodidact tendencies, thus effectively pre-selling *The Avengers* before its release.

### **The Secret Origin of a Genre?**

The superhero is an ubiquitous global cultural phenomenon in contemporary society. Films, comic-books, and TV programmes routinely show superheroes saving the world. Faux-superhero-inspired clothes — ranging from children's Halloween costumes to Superman-logoed tee shirts to adult lingerie — abound. Political cartoons often satirically depict correct or ineffective politicians as failed superheroes. A significant amount of academic scholarship, accordingly, has sprung up around the superhero over the last half-century.

However, within this field of scholarship, there is little consensus as to what exactly the superhero *is*. One strain, for example, completely elides definitions, instead choosing only to define the individual superhero which happens to be their key objects of study. Both Will Brooker's 2000 *Batman Unmasked* and Roberta Pearson and William Urrichio's 1992 "I'm Not Fooled by that Cheap Disguise," for example, define DC Comics's Batman as a series of key characteristics. (37-9, 186-8) This section of scholarship essentially says that while Batman in particular is a subject worthy of deeper analysis, there already exists enough knowledge regarding the superhero in general; audiences already know what superheroes are.

Another section only offers brief definitions. Umberto Eco's late-1960s work conceives of, for example, the superhero as a figure of industrial society who 'embod[ies] to an unthinkable degree the power demands that the average citizen nurtures but cannot satisfy.' (107) Bradford Wright's 2003 historical study *Comic Book Nation*, similarly, briefly describes the superhero as 'a brilliant twentieth-century version on a classic American hero type' (10), the Western frontier hero. Where these frontier heroes previously 'tame[d] and conquer[ed] the savage American frontier, twentieth-century America demanded a superhero who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven and anonymous mass society.' (Wright 10) These definitions are initially useful, but do not account for the inclusion of mythical figures such as Thor and Hercules in the superhero canons of Marvel and DC.

A final, comparatively smaller section represents significant attempts at a definition. In his 1992 scholarly work, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, Richard Reynolds says that 'the superhero genre is tightly defined and defended by its committed readership' (7). He subsequently gives a 'first stage working definition ... of the superhero and, by extension, his genre.' (Reynolds 16) According to Reynolds, the superhero is an iconoclast whose powers set him above and apart from the everyday sphere, especially since this hero disguises



himself with a mundane alter-ego. (16) As a vigilante, he devotes himself to the spirit of justice as opposed to the letter of the law, yet is ‘capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state.’ (16)

Building on Reynolds’s work, the most exacting and influential definition of what a superhero is comes from Peter Coogan’s 2006 *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. Coogan’s work has an entire chapter devoted to “The Definition of the Superhero” (30-60), and this chapter has not only been quoted at length on popular website Wikipedia’s entry on the superhero, but been reprinted wholesale in Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester’s scholarly *A Comics Studies Reader* (2008), for this definition has ‘value in highlighting the superhero genre as a distinct genre of its own, and not an offshoot of science fiction or fantasy.’ (Coogan 48) Coogan argues that the superhero can be defined by his ‘mission, powers, identity, and generic distinction’ (58). With regards to the first three elements, Coogan sees superheroes as beings who, when having shed their mundane civilian *secret identities*, use their exaggerated *powers* (such as leaping tall buildings or stopping bullets) to perform a ‘prosocial and selfless’ (31) *mission*-adventure. As such, the ‘elements [of] mission, powers, and identity ... establish the core of the [superhero] genre.’ (Coogan 39)

However, Coogan qualifies this taxonomy by noting that ‘as with other genres, specific superheroes can exist who do not fully demonstrate these three elements, and heroes from other genres may exist who display all three elements to some degree but should not be regarded as superheroes.’ (40) Batman, for example, is a superhero with no powers, while Marvel Comics’s rampaging and bestial The Incredible Hulk is a superhero with no mission, and his compatriots The Fantastic Four have long since shed their secret identities, preferring instead to adventure as public figures. (Coogan 41) The element of generic distinction, ‘that is, the concatenation of other conventions ... family resemblances [between texts]’ (43) thus comes into play. Coogan, unlike Reynolds, argues that generic distinction is ‘a crucial

element of the superhero ...mark[ing] the superhero genre of from the rest of the adventure meta-genre.’ (48-58) He cites television’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a counter-example, noting that *Buffy*, despite her Batman-level fighting ability and vampire-hunting mission, is not a superhero. This is because *Buffy*, as *Vampire Slayer*, is ‘a hero-type that predates the superhero, fitting firmly within the larger horror genre ...descend[ing] from Dr. Van Helsing in *Dracula*.’ (Coogan 48) Thus, while ‘*Buffy* draw[s] upon superhero conventions, the stories are generically distinct from the superhero genre.’ (Coogan 48):

*Buffy* is a super hero, as are heroic characters from other genres that have extraordinary abilities such as *The Shadow*, *The Phantom*, *Beowulf*, or *Luke Skywalker*. They are superior to ordinary human beings and ordinary protagonists of more realistic fiction in significant ways. While they are called super heroes, super is used as an adjective that modifies hero; but they are not superheroes, that is, they are not the protagonists of superhero-genre narratives. (48-9)

Coogan further says that the same is true for characters from other genres that are sometimes found in superhero comics, such as ‘spies, cowboys, knights, and ninja. Generic distinction marks these characters as non-superheroes even though they may have the missions and powers requisite to be superheroes, and might even possess elements of the identity convention.’ (Coogan 57-8) He specifically mentions Marvel’s spy chief *Nick Fury* as one such example which muddles genre distinctions. While *Nick Fury* does indeed ally occasionally with superheroes to battle some menace, and has a counter-espionage mission, Coogan argues that:

[*Nick Fury*] has no superpowers, although another character with access to his stock of weaponry and equipment could operate as a superhero. He has no secret identity and no separate heroic identity, nor any costume that announces such an identity. Although he occasionally opposes the schemes of Marvel Universe supervillians, his enemies typically take the form of traditional spy villains, primarily similarly-equipped organizations like *Hydra* or *A.I.M.*, who wear outfits more in line with those of Klan-influenced pulp villains than with inverted-superhero supervillain costumes. *Nick Fury* fits neatly within the spy/ secret agent genre, which has deep roots going back to the early twentieth century in characters like *Operator #5* and the *Diplomatic Free Lances*. (Coogan 50)

While Coogan does concede that a character's 'definition as a superhero varie[s] depending upon the concatenation of conventions in any particular story' (55), he ultimately argues that 'if a character fits the [mission-powers-identity] conventions, even with some significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre, the character is a superhero.' (44)

Coogan's influential definition of the superhero is useful but problematic. I agree with Coogan that the 'superhero genre [is] a distinct genre of its own' (48), and with his additional claim that 'a sloppy definition of the superhero makes it more difficult to examine the way the superhero genre embodies cultural mythology and narratively animates and resolves cultural conflicts and tensions' (60), especially since this entire thesis examines the comic-book superhero movie. However, I do not agree with Coogan's numerous qualifiers with regard to superheroism. One gets the sense that he is shifting the goalposts a fair bit, especially in light of his contradictory examples and counter-examples. Batman and Buffy both have a secret identity, a mission, and with her enhanced strength, speed and reflexes, Buffy in fact has more powers than Batman. In fact, she resembles Marvel Comics's vampire hunter Blade. Yet, Coogan does not consider her a superhero in his zeal to emphasise the uniqueness of the superhero genre.

### **A Hyper-Hybrid Genre**

Nor do I agree that the superhero genre is 'not an offshoot of science fiction or fantasy' (Coogan 48) and that a superhero is a figure which 'cannot be easily placed into another genre.' (Coogan 44) With regard to this point, the notion of genres as inherently chimerical constructs is supported by the overwhelming majority of the existing literature regarding genre theory. Jacques Derrida, for example, sees texts as intrinsically 'participat[ing] in one

or several genres, [such that] there is no genreless text' (65), and that 'the law of the law of genre is...a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy' (59). This is because while genre classifications ostensibly demarcate the bounds of a genre's verisimilitude, they simultaneously exist alongside the indefinite divisibility of whichever traits the genre possesses. (Derrida 59-60) In this Derridean vein, Mark Wallace notes that 'there is no defining shared characteristic of any genre that can't be broken down into further differences, and no characteristics of any piece of writing that can be absolutely the same as any other piece of writing' (n.p.), so much so that 'our notions of genre as a form of sameness ultimately break down in any close examination of the traits of a given text. Any two texts are part of the same genre only as long as one is generalizing.' (n.p.) Thor comics, as representative examples, are thus about simultaneously about gods and superheroes.

Where popular genres — within which the superhero genre is situated — are specifically concerned, Rick Altman finds that 'genre mixing has long been a standard Hollywood practice ...[albeit] rudimentary at best, typically involving a small number of genres combined in an unspectacular and fairly traditional manner.' (141) Altman argues that it was only during the 1980s, with films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg 1981), and *Die Hard* (McTiernan 1988), when studios self-consciously drew attention to the combination of seemingly inimical genres — in these cases thriller and comedy — to stress genre conflict. (141) Steve Neale departs from Altman to argue that 'accounts of New Hollywood and genre tend to overemphasize hybridity' (251), for 'it could be argued that we have yet to see any New Hollywood blockbuster equivalent to *The Phantom Empire* (Brower and Eason 1935), an old Hollywood serial about a singing cowboy in outer space.' (250) Yet, Neale, in mentioning his singing space cowboy, is also adamant that films have long been hybrid and multi-generic texts, 'grab bag[s] of plots ...crazy quilt[s].' (249)

With regards to the superhero genre, however, such a grab-bag-borrowing and redeployment of tropes and elements from other genres was similarly already apparent when the first — and hugely influential — superhero, Superman, was conceptualised in the 1930s. As Henry Jenkins points out, Superman’s creators were keen on marketing his eponymous comic-strip as a mixture of ‘Speed-Action-Laughs-Thrills-Surprises. The most unusual humour-adventure strip ever created!’ (in “Tights” 27) When the second major – and equally influential – superhero, Batman was introduced in 1939, his creator Bob Kane blended the iconography of pulp horror with the narrative of detective stories to distinguish his character. As Will Brooker notes, with Batman’s first appearance in print being ‘a winged silhouette on a city rooftop, against a full moon ...and the episode title, ‘The Case of the Chemical Syndicate’ ...if the picture recalls *Dracula*, the title could almost head up a Sherlock Holmes story.’ (44) This process happened again in the wildly popular Marvel Comics of the 1960s, which revitalised the superhero genre:

The earliest issues of the successful Marvel franchises situate these protagonists in relationship to other genre traditions with the heroes dwarfed on the original *Fantastic Four* (1961- ) cover by a giant green monster, with the *Incredible Hulk* (1961-1962) depicted as a “super-Frankenstein” character, with Iron Man built around the iconography of robots and cyborgs, and Spider-Man first appearing in the pages of *Amazing Fantasy* (1962). While these characters today are viewed as archetypal superheroes, they had previously been read - at least in part - in relation to these other genres. (Jenkins, “Tights” 28-29)

Such an all-consuming, all-inclusive ethos is what, contrary to Coogan’s claims about uniqueness, differentiates the superhero genre from other popular ones. Neale notes that ‘if there are areas and instances of hybridity and overlap, there are also areas of differentiation — few would describe *Dracula* (Browning 1931) as science fiction, just as few would describe *Silent Running* (Trumbull 1972) or *Logan’s Run* (Anderson 1976) as horror films.’ (Neale 92) As seen from the examples above, this is not the case when superhero comics are involved. Where Neale’s examples are specifically concerned, not only does Batman cloak

himself in Gothic foreboding, but The Avengers have additionally fought Dracula in multiple high-stakes battles over the decades. A recent multi-part issue featured, for example, *Hulk Vs. Dracula* (Gischler and Stegman 2011). The anxieties raised by the environmentalist-themed science fiction film *Silent Running* are raised again during Albert Pyun's 1990 cinematic iteration of *Captain America* when the titular superhero saves a keenly environmentalist American president from a neo-Nazi organization which dislikes trees and clean air. As for the dystopian future of *Logan's Run* in which a state employee rebels against a totalitarian state that mandates the murder of citizens once they turn thirty, key long-running storylines in the X-Men franchise involve the *Days of Future Past* (Claremont and Byrne 2006) and the *Age of Apocalypse*. (Lobdell and Garney 2012) These are two different possible futures of the Marvel Universe which both involve the imprisonment and culling of mutants who are either intrinsically undesirable Others to the machineries of the totalitarian state, or who fall out of favour with it. In fact, one recent iteration of The Avengers franchise, the direct-to-video animated movie *Next Avengers* (Oliva and Hartle 2008), explicitly locates its superheroes – respectively: Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Black Widow, Giant-Man, Black Panther, The Wasp, The Vision, and Hawkeye – against the tradition of the medieval adventure-romance. Its aged Iron Man narrates over a sepia-tinted opening montage sequence:

And there came a day unlike any other, where Earth's mightiest heroes were united against a common threat. The soldier. The god. The knight. The spy. The giant. The king. The pixie. The ghost. And the archer. On that day, The Avengers were born. To fight foes that no single hero could withstand. (Oliva and Hartle 2008)

This relocation is a convincing one. As the old Iron Man goes down his list of medieval character archetypes, a still shot of a superhero is juxtaposed onto the screen, accentuating his or her connection to the romance. Iron Man is shown dressed in full battle armour, the curious physical sizes of Giant-Man and The Wasp are highlighted, and Hawkeye aims his bow towards the camera in the dashing fashion of Errol Flynn. The superhero genre, thus, is

one that has expanded outwards since its initial gestalt of “Speed-Action-Laughs-Thrills-Surprises”, so much so that it has appropriated older genres such as high fantasy, science fiction, and horror, and consequently reconfigured them such that they now all have their place within its generic rubric. The genre is not so much a grab bag or crazy quilt of existing genre tropes, associations, and plots. It is more akin to an entire department store of these. It is a hyper-hybrid genre — or a meta-genre — within which stock characters from other pre-existing genres of adventure fiction inevitably show up, recuperated as superheroes by the genre’s all-inclusive ethos, to perform in narratives predicated on “Speed-Action-Laughs-Thrills-Surprises” and more besides.

### **Assembling Expectations**

What causes this all-inclusive ethos? The relentlessly serial format of the superhero’s source medium — the comic-book — is a key underlying factor. Popular genres, after all, are invariably commercial ones, and as the traditional names of the Big Two comic book publishers — Marvel Comics and Detective Comics — suggest, comic-books have historically been their primary stock in trade. Superman, for example, was initially the star of a single comic strip in *Action Comics* magazine, but got his own magazine when his popularity meant that ‘by the seventh issue [in early 1939], *Action Comics* was selling over half-a-million copies each month’ (Wright 9), a figure which was more than double the over-printed 200, 000 copies of *Action Comics*’s first issue. During the World War II years, monthly comic book sales were 25 million copies a month. (Wright 30) Of these, the topicality of the newly conceived *Captain America*, which featured the “Super-Soldier” Captain America punching Nazis while he was dressed in the stars and stripes of the American flag, resonated keenly with the era’s consumers. Even with other superheroes discovering a similar sense of patriotism so much so as to take part in fantastical war narratives — Captain Marvel joined the Marines, and Wonder Woman served as a nurse —

Captain America ‘quickly became Marvel’s best-selling title and most popular character, selling close to a million copies monthly throughout the war.’ (Wright 36) During the Marvel renaissance of the 1960s, the company’s editors tapped upon the era’s ‘major re-evaluation of youth culture as an economic, social, and political force ...[and the fact that] millions of young Americans were taking an increasingly active role in shaping the political culture of their times.’ (Wright 200-01) They created new superheroes which ‘played to some of the moral ambivalence that young people recognized and responded to’ (Wright 204), with their first title, November 1961’s *The Fantastic Four #1* (Lee and Kirby), featuring superheroes who bickered and jawed with one another like a fractious real-life nuclear family. The serial nature of the comic book medium, thus, allows for, and necessitates that the superhero genre constantly incorporate new character-heroes to arrest the imaginations, and empty the wallets, of oft-fickle readers.

The other, interlinked, factor has to do with the fact that audience expectations are as key to genres — and here we note that the superhero genre is one which is inextricably centred around its characters — as actual genre texts are. For Formalist theorist John Cawelti, genre texts are ‘certain types of stories which have highly predictable structures which guarantee the fulfilment of conventional expectations: the detective story, the western, the romance, and many other such types.’ (1) Jonathan Gray finds that ‘genres are frequently defined outside the text, at the level of audience talk, policy discussions, and papers, advertising, industry briefs, etc.’ (38) Similarly, Thomas Schatz sees each particular film genre as a by-product of the capitalist free market’s ‘conditions of commercial filmmaking itself, whereby popular stories are varied and repeated as long as they satisfy audience demand and turn a profit for the studios.’ (*Genres* 16) As a result of this repetitive interaction between audiences and producers, ‘a film genre gradually impresses itself upon the culture until it becomes a familiar, meaningful system that can be named as such.’ (Schatz, *Genres* 16) A tacit genre contract between filmmakers and



audiences thus develops: audiences, for example, decide to watch a Western when producers promise that it will involve the ritual restaging of whatever well-loved conventions — such as stoic gunmen, prostitutes with hearts of gold, and the taming of the Indian Other — are an integral part of, or have been incorporated into, the genre. (Schatz, *Genres* 16) It is these promises which serve to locate a text within a particular genre for its putative audiences.

With regards to the hyper-hybrid nature of the superhero genre, thus, the significance of its surrounding paratexts is especially key to understanding its hybrid nature. According to Gerard Genette, the paratext is the ancillary material which ‘enables a text to become a book, and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public.’ (1) As a threshold to the pleasure of the text within, the paratext ‘offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back.’ (Genette, “Paratexts” 2) It surrounds and extends the text, ‘precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption.’ (Genette, “Paratexts” 1)

While Genette was writing specifically regarding book titles, prefaces, and illustrations — indeed, his rhetorical example is ‘how would we read [James] Joyce’s *Ulysses* if it were not entitled *Ulysses*?’ (“Paratexts” 2) — comic book covers are also examples of such paratexts. Their garish colours and logos combine with large-font lettering, and drawings of superheroes either in potent positions of power or (more frequently) in *pieta*-like torment. They thus, since the 1960s, provide putative readers of comic-books with visually arresting friezes which are symbolic and stylized interpretations of actual scenes in the comic book’s narrative, promising that the issue within will accordingly feature ‘Spider-Man ...No More!’ (Lee and Romita Sr.), or that the X-Men will face ‘What Waits ...Within The Hive!’. (Drake and Romita Sr.)

However, comic book covers do have a different relationship to the actual stories than conventional book covers. The images featured on the various covers of *Ulysses* are not literally present in its text, and never will be. *Ulysses* is a narrative comprised solely of words. Comic-books are narratives which fuse words with pictures, and the artists who work on comic book covers are often the same ones who draw the comic book's panels and portraiture. The book cover is akin to a signpost. It presents to its audiences a more abstracted and mediated promise, converting and re-presenting the words of *Ulysses* into a picture-form which has no direct, 1:1 relation with the story. The comic book cover, contrastingly, is akin to a snapshot. Some degree of abstraction is indeed going on, but it ultimately presents its audiences with a more direct slice of the story contained within, especially after the Marvel Renaissance of the 1960s. Comic book covers, accordingly, have a much closer relationship to their stories than book covers do. Indeed, while vastly different covers of a book may proliferate, it is rare for comic-books to have more than one cover. This is even when individual issues are reprinted, and cover art is furthermore typically chosen from the existing store of covers when certain issues are bound together as trade paperbacks.

As a result of this close visual relationship between the paratext and the text, and the fact that the figure of the superhero is key to the superhero genre, comic book covers have historically been powerful ways of stage-managing the expectations of the comic book's audiences. Visually arresting and nigh-instantly decodable as these covers are, they provide convenient access points into the economies of belief which producers want audiences to buy into. One need only give a cursory glance at the cover of *Uncanny X-Men #131* (Claremont and Byrne) to know that The White Queen is evil, and that the X-Men will confront her in the story proper. Gigantically out of scale, she, dressed in a white corset, looms over the X-Men, a crazed expression on her face while they fight rifle-toting guards to free their friends from slaving pens. It is evident that her goals and moral code are clearly opposed to the X-Men's,

and the accompanying subtitle, “Prisoners of The White Queen!” supports this. Yet, on the cover of *Uncanny X-Men #497* (Brubaker and Choi), she (still in a white corset) is portrayed as being of unremarkable height. She stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the X-Men, her jaw set identically firm as befits the little logo at the bottom stating that the issue is part of the “Divided We Stand” storyline. The rhetoric of this image is equally clear — she is an important part of the X-Men, is of similar solidarity-focused mindset as the rest of the superhero team, and will play a key part in the issue’s narrative. The fact that audiences can glean all this information about The White Queen without reading the actual comic book issues is significant. It is the paratext, rather than the core text itself, that has framed the way in which she is supposed to be read and understood — whether as mad despot or as loyal teammate —in the context of each particular issue.

The producer reliance on the paratext to create meanings and structure the expectations of audiences is similarly evident in Marvel Studios’s promotional materials for *The Avengers*. These materials include high-resolution stills and artwork based on the movie. One of the earliest-released and widely-circulated group posters, for example, literally shows all these characters as being on equal footing with one another: standing close together, they strike dramatic poses amidst the rubble of a destroyed city. Another lavishly painted set of character pin-up posters is also significant for its near-consistent visual grammar throughout. All except one of these posters feature a tinted background against which a full colour body shot of its character charges out of the foreground. These posters can additionally be placed side by side to form a linking mural. These materials invite audiences to celebrate and anticipate the alliance of these characters as a special, but ultimately conceivable, event. There is nothing in these materials — no characters looking surprised at each other’s presence, no stylized dotted lines or ripped paper separating characters from one another — which would cue audiences to read the uniting of the disparate Avengers as a grossly incongruous

occurrence. Rather, these paratextual promotional materials prefigure this alliance as well within the bounds of generic verisimilitude.

### **What Isn't a Superhero?**

A two-minute trailer for the movie, though, is the centrepiece of the paratextual promotional materials which surround *The Avengers*. As a separate and supplementary narrative space to the movie (which, incomplete, had just entered post-production as of the trailer's October 2011 release), this trailer is a rapid-fire montage-promise of key premises and scenes which will appear in the movie. It starts with panning shots of skyscrapers and exploding cars. There is general panic in the streets which both the police and the army seem unable to contain. The Norse god of mischief, Loki, monologues from his shadowy lair that '[humans] were made to be ruled. In the end, it will be every man for himself.' (MARVEL n.p.) A voice-over from Nick Fury is immediately juxtaposed against this speech. 'There was an idea to bring together a group of remarkable people. So when we needed them, they'd fight the battles we never could.' (MARVEL n.p.) Keyed to, and following, Fury's speech, are shots of these "remarkable people" in explosive, exaggerated *mêlée*. Captain America's iconic shield returns to him, and he vaults over an urban battlefield of wrecked cars and smoking roads. Thor raises his hammer to the sky. Hawkeye fires explosive arrows with his bow. Black Widow poses while detonating a remote-controlled bomb, and afterwards performs a pro-wrestling slam on a guard inside a military facility. Iron Man lowers his visor and his eyes glow. 'If we can't protect the Earth, we damn sure will avenge it,' (MARVEL n.p.) says Iron Man as the trailer ends and the screen fades into a title card with "The Avengers" in large, stylized font on it.

It is doubtful that the movie audiences of 2011 — among whom the hyperspectator is included — do not know that Captain America, Thor, and Iron Man are superheroes. The

former two were the subjects of widely released, attended, and promoted titular blockbuster movies in July and May 2011. *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010) was commissioned to tap upon the runaway success of the first Iron Man movie in 2008. However, the same level of familiarity with Black Widow and Hawkeye is less certain. While *Iron Man 2* introduces Black Widow as a supporting character, other new characters such as the archvillain Whiplash, and Iron Man's similarly-armoured employee War Machine, are given more screen time than her. The dark-suited Hawkeye appears during a dimly-lit two minute scene in *Thor* as an archer who shoots Thor with a tranquilizer arrow. Mixing in the action shots of Black Widow and Hawkeye together with those of Captain America, Thor, and Iron Man, though, makes *The Avengers*'s trailer work in much the same way that the cover of *Uncanny X-Men #497* does in its instant recuperation of The White Queen as one of the superheroic X-Men. With contemporary trailers produced to 'fold story appeals into genre appeals ...often reading as expanded taglines or high concept statements for the film' (Kernan 214), the trailer hypes Black Widow and Hawkeye, signalling to audiences that they are roughly in the same superhuman league as their teammates, thus aligning them within *The Avengers*'s central conceit of various superheroes teaming up "to fight the battles [ordinary people] never could." This is especially since the shots of these characters in action can not only be read against the helplessness of the police and army when confronted with the evil Loki's penchant for wanton automobile destruction, but also with the inclusive "we" — and the accompanying "The Avengers" title card — of Iron Man's bravado-laden end comment. The message is equally clear. "We" includes Hawkeye, Black Widow, Captain America, The Hulk, Thor, and Iron Man himself. "We" make up The Avengers. The Avengers are superheroes. "We" are all superheroes.

I highlight *The Avengers*'s trailer because movie trailers have traditionally been important tools for Hollywood filmmakers. Kristin Thompson mentions, for example, that 'in selling a

film to the public, studios have long relied on the three legs of marketing: theatrical preview trailers, television advertising, and the graphic design that will appear in newspapers and on posters.’ (105) Like comic book covers, though, trailers offer a less abstracted, more immediate glimpse into their main text than posters do. They are thus better able to function as persuasive devices, more adroitly accentuating what producers believe are the most interest-inducing parts of the film-commodity proper, particularly because these producers subscribe to the belief that trailers help generate at least 20% of the film’s box-office revenue despite being relatively cheap to produce. (Kernan 32) And as Lisa Kernan additionally argues, trailers also have a paradoxical nature, being reductive and expansive at the same time. (218) This is since they have to, by necessity of their status as a anticipatory threshold to the film text, use a few shots as shorthand for a host of implications and associations that the film will follow up upon. As much as these film trailers further exaggerate the most interesting parts of the film, their rhetoric ‘equally resides in the “spaces between” the images of the trailer montage.’ (Kernan 216) Thus, these trailers can be harnessed to promote the ‘film’s narrative world, assuming audiences’ desires to experience the unfolding of the [blockbuster] event film more as a surrounding environment than as a causal chain of activity.’ (Kernan 214) A well-produced movie trailer, in sum, has historically been a rhetorical, highly profitable paratext which circulates around a film.

In the postmillennial era, however, where the integrated audio-visual experience that is a movie trailer can be streamed in a variety of high-quality formats across a larger variety of media devices anywhere in the world, and can be shared and mirrored on social media websites such as Facebook and YouTube, movie trailers have the edge over the television adverts and posters which Thompson mentions. In addition to being more immersive texts than posters and other print advertisements, their normally two-minute-plus runtimes allow them to show more of the film than thirty-second television advertisements are able to, yet

allow their consumers to quickly move on to other media texts afterwards. These two features of trailers further predispose them — more so than posters and short television spots — towards being re-linked to, and replicated, virally online. Jonathan Gray notes, thus, that ‘as much as we often talk about YouTube as being the site for amateur creativity ... the things that get the most viewership on YouTube [are] quite often trailers.’ (in “Show” n.p.) A cursory search on YouTube bears out Gray’s claims. A fan-made mock trailer for *The Avengers*, “The Avengers Trailer — sweded, parody”<sup>4</sup>, was uploaded to YouTube in October 2011. (bryanharley n.p.) As of March 2012, this parody trailer has amassed just over 600, 000 views. The official *Avengers* trailer, by contrast, has amassed over 12 million views on YouTube in the same timeframe, and a United Kingdom cut of the trailer has had over 21 million views in the one month since its YouTube release. Both Kerman’s and Thompson’s research, thus, takes on added importance when the viral nature of digital video-sharing media platforms are considered. In postmillennial Hollywood, trailers present as much more important paratexts than they traditionally were.

In fact, *The Avengers*’s trailer is so important that it is a paratext which is readable as a text in and of itself. Such a shift into such a liminal zone, admittedly, is not necessarily confined to movie trailers. The cover of *Action Comics #1* (Siegel and Shuster) which introduced a car-carrying Superman to the world, for example, is an iconic image which has endured in popular memory even after the actual events of the issue have become obscure. Nonetheless, what gives *The Avengers*’s trailer a greater claim to being a full-fledged text is that as of March 2011, a full five months after its release, the movie that it is supposed to be a threshold to does not yet exist as a finished and consumable product. The movie trailer is, in effect, created and released to exist much more independently from the (often non-existent at the

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<sup>4</sup> The colloquial term “sweded”, from *Be Kind, Rewind* (Gondry 2008), refers to recordings of deliberately awful amateur re-enactments of scenes from professionally-produced movies.

trailer's release) core film text than a comic book cover (which would have a fully readable comic book attached behind it) does.

For Gray, the production of hype is central to the saturated contemporary media industry. Due to this media saturation resulting in 'more films, television programs, books, magazines, songs, etc. than we could ever hope to consume, a key role of hype is to give us reasons to watch *this* film or television program, read *this* book or magazine, or listen to *this* song. In short, hype succeeds by creating meaning.' (Gray 34) Hype, further, incites the 'excitement and/or apprehension [of a text's potential audiences], and begin[s] to tell us what a text is all about, calling for our identification with and interpretation of that text before we have even seemingly arrived at the text.' (Gray 34) It is entirely apropos, then, that *The Avengers's* trailer not only has its own presentational paratexts calculatedly embedded within its two-minute runtime, but was additionally hyped as an important entertainment media event in itself, so much so that Marvel constantly produced (and continues to produce) other paratexts around it. With regard to the first point, the trailer runs for about thirty seconds before a government representative asks Nick Fury what the forces of law and order should do in response to Loki's car-destroying ways. Fury responds that 'we [should] get ready.' (MARVEL n.p.) The scene cuts, briefly displaying the Paramount Pictures splash logo of stars circling a mountain. The Paramount logo, in turn, then cuts to comic book panels — complete with capitalized sound effects — flashing on screen, all the while fading into the solid red background and the boxed and capitalized white "MARVEL" text that together comprise the Marvel Studios logo. It is only after this second logo fully fades in that the trailer cuts back to the diegetic world of *The Avengers*: audiences immediately see characters gearing up for battle.

As a generic signifier of studio authorship, the Paramount logo will, in the same way that James Bond's spy adventures never involve the roaring lion of the MGM logo, have nothing



to do with *The Avengers*'s plot and narrative. It is the Marvel Studios logo which is more significant here. As paratext to *The Avengers*'s trailer, the display of the Marvel Studios logo works on a different level than that of Paramount's. Its flashing onomatopoeic panels are meant to evoke the reading of a comic book, a medium which, in the postmillennial popular imagination, remains inextricably associated with superheroes. (Dotinga n.p.) The logo is thus meant to tap upon this popular conflation of medium with the character-centred superhero genre, presenting the film and its characters as within the superhero idiom. Combined with Fury's preceding audio cue that 'we [should] get ready' (MARVEL n.p.), this logo is readable as being deliberately deployed for audiences to anticipate the appearance of superheroes. Accordingly, the Marvel Studios logo immediately cuts back to the world of *The Avengers*, and audiences see shots of various characters getting ready for battle. Both the calculated positioning and the expectation-forming mission of the paratextual Marvel logo, divorced as it is from the world of *The Avengers*, thus makes it function as a rhetorical device which in effect cues the audiences to read the trailer as being under the aegis of Marvel Comics's regime of quality and authenticity, further hyping a paratext which was in itself supposed to hype a non-existent (at the point of the trailer's dissemination) text.

As for the second point regarding the trailer's own paratext-generating status, Marvel Studios has repeatedly asserted the importance of *The Avengers*'s trailer. A notice after the ending of *Thor* stated that 'Thor will return in *The Avengers*' (Branagh n.p.), and a post-credits scene after *Captain America* transitioned into a roughly twenty-second *The Avengers* teaser which flashed clips from the yet-uncompleted movie. A second teaser, this time a thirty-second preview of the trailer itself, was distributed to, and then broadcast, on an episode of the mass syndication entertainment news program *Entertainment Tonight*. Advertisements for that episode stressed the broadcast of this preview as the prime reason for

audiences to tune in. Marvel uploaded the full-length trailer to the popular iTunes online media service the following day.

The trailer set an iTunes record. It accumulated over 10 million views within the first twenty-four hours of its upload, becoming the most-viewed trailer ever in iTunes's history. Two days later, Marvel's publicists set out a press release headlined "Marvel's *The Avengers* Trailer Downloaded Over 10 Million Times in First 24 Hours on iTunes Movie Trailers: Breaks Site's Previous Most-Viewed Trailer Record." (Rasic and del Rossi n.p.) The press release continues:

The trailer, which debuted Tuesday, October 11, exclusively on iTunes Movie Trailers, gives fans a sneak peak at "Marvel's *The Avengers*" — the Super Hero team up of a lifetime — based on the ever-popular Marvel comic book series "*The Avengers*," first published in 1963 and a comics institution ever since.

The film unites the world's greatest Super Heroes when Iron Man (Robert Downey, Jr.), Thor (Chris Hemsworth), Captain America (Chris Evans), The Incredible Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) and Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) join S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Nick Fury (Samuel Jackson) to protect the world from the dangerously powerful villain, Loki (Tom Hiddleston). (Rasic and del Rossi n.p.)

This paratextual press release borrows the format and diction of the news report, effectively re-presenting the trailer's promises in an epistolary tone which is weighted with authority. Supporting this faux-authoritative tone are a host of real-world facts easily and independently verifiable from other sources; Wikipedia, newspapers, radio broadcasts, perhaps even other sections of the iTunes website itself. Here are real dates ('Tuesday, October 11', '1963'), real numbers ('over 10 million', 'first 24 hours'), and real people (Robert Downey Jr. et. al.). (Rasic and del Rossi n.p.) These real facts are interwoven with assertions — 'team up of a lifetime', 'ever-popular', and, most significantly, 'the world's greatest Super Heroes ...Hawkeye ...Black Widow.' (Rasic and del Rossi n.p.)

It is these interwoven assertions, meant to be taken as gospel due to their close proximity to a brace of verifiable facts, which are key in creating meaning, and thus the acceptance of *The Avengers*'s cast of generically dissonant characters as all being superheroes. Where *The Avengers*'s trailer is a road map which cues the way in which the forthcoming movie should be interpreted, the press release is like this road map's legend, firmly determining what the symbols and stars on this map signify. As Kernan argues, millennial Hollywood was an era 'where promotion and visual narrative [had] become increasingly difficult to disentangle in all kinds of popular media.' (1) Postmillennial Hollywood resoundingly intensifies this. When it comes to the postmillennial blockbuster movie event, paratext simultaneously exists as text. *The Avengers*'s trailer is therefore instrumental in creating meaning, due to its reductive status cueing associations and implications into the minds of its audiences, and especially due to its surrounding paratexts explicitly spelling out these meanings for audiences. While — to return to Coogan's problematic points about the inviolability of the superhero genre — Black Widow, a Russian-accented *femme fatale*, and Hawkeye, a sharpshooting paramilitary archer, can both definitely be placed within the spy thriller genre, they are neither presented nor promoted as such in these meaning-making paratexts. Instead, they are among 'the world's greatest Super Heroes' (Marvel n.p.), making even more clear the trailer's already unambiguous message that "we" are all superheroes.

### **Conclusion: Leading the Hyper-Spectator On**

How, then, does the hyper-spectator fit into this postmillennial mediascape of hyper-hybridity and hype? Classical film theorists, such as Christian Metz, for example, consider the silence and the illusion of solitude typically provided by the classical cinema hall — so much so that its audiences 'more closely resemble the fragmented group of readers of a novel' (801-02) as opposed to a unified collective — to be a necessary condition for spectatorship. Jean-Louis Baudry, similarly, envisages a scenario where there is 'the darkness

of the movie theatre, the relative passivity of the situation, [and] the forced immobility of the cine-subject' (313), which work in concord to pleasurably regress the spectator back to an earlier psychoanalytic phase in which 'the separation between one's own body and the exterior world is not well-defined' (313). Building upon this framework, Francesco Casetti notes that the hyper-spectator, this active manipulator of reception contexts and media, continues to engage — as the spectator-figures of previous era did — in what he calls a '*cognitive doing* which enables us to interpret that which we see.' (7) This process, however, is now often achieved through hyper-spectators decentering themselves from the text, for 'more than "understanding" a film, [they] find themselves either "exploring" at the source of that which they find in front of them to better orient themselves.' (7) By way of example, Casetti specifically mentions the hyper-spectator's 'need to determine the genre of the film that one is watching ...[and] storing up elements for future viewing (as for instance, when one extracts from a DVD the "mother scenes" which produced the most enjoyment' (7) for re-viewing. To enjoy a film, for Casetti, is now '*a doing* that leaps beyond the presence of a big screen, and that goes beyond the mere opening of one's eyes.' (9) This is a mode of viewing distinctly removed from classical notions of spectatorship, and the environs needed for it.

*The Avengers*'s trailer — generically hybrid, eminently re-viewable, and paradoxically reductive and expansive as it is — can be considered in this new light. As part of a larger system of hype and promotion, the lacunae between each of its rapid cuts<sup>5</sup> are exceedingly appealing and potent. These lacunae encourage the hyper-spectator to return to this larger system, seeking out its conveniently accessed, conveniently signposted answers so that the gaps in knowledge fostered by these cuts may be filled. The hyper-spectator's re-view of *The*

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<sup>5</sup> There are approximately 90 cuts in *The Avengers*'s trailer in total, thus giving each cut an average length of little over a second.

*Avengers*'s trailer, then, is one which will be easily facilitated, and one which will be appealingly enhanced and curtailed by the added producer-sanctioned knowledge gleaned from the (para)texts which surround it. This, coupled with whichever memories of *The Avengers*'s characters that one may already have, but are not directly re-presented in the film's paratexts, creates in the hyped-up hyper-spectator the counterfeit and pleasing fantasy of being authentically apart from the unenlightened *hoi palloi*. Adorno and Horkheimer's misgivings regarding the stage-managed performances of 'the standardized jazz improvisation ...the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eyes to demonstrate her originality ...the defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show' (154) during the 1950s now take on a new relevance. Where spectators once (mis)identified with these faux-iconoclasts to positively and quixotically differentiate themselves from the imaged Other that was the subservient masses, the hyper-spectator — who has voluntarily accumulated from multiple media platforms and (possibly) personal memory a working storehouse of producer-sanctioned knowledge/ hype — can now additionally (mis)identify with the producers of the film's (para)text as opposed to (in this conception) the unenlightened and passive masses who are glad to receive a barebones iteration of the complete *The Avengers* experience.

In sum, I have argued in this chapter that existing definitions of the superhero are problematic, especially those that make the case for the superhero being a unique figure that cannot be located within another genre. Rather, the superhero genre operates by its producers incorporating and recuperating stock characters — such as robots, or gods, or soldiers, or spies — from other pre-existing genres of adventure fiction, and then re-presenting these characters to their audiences as superheroes. Marketing paratexts such as comic-book covers — visually striking, nigh-instantly decodable — have historically been key to this strategy,

especially since the expectations of audiences are as key to genres as the actual genre texts are. Where postmillennial superhero films — and their attendant new media climate of hype and hyper-spectatorship — are concerned, though, trailers currently present as key marketing paratexts. These trailers are of such importance that they can be read as full-fledged texts in and of themselves, and can further generate paratexts of their own. This, in turn, increases their rhetorical affect, since the form and content of these other paratexts also simultaneously appeal to the hyper-spectator's compulsive need to explore and understand media texts. *The Avengers's* marketing strategy, thus, presents as a useful case study in how the discerning, media-literate hyper-spectator of the postmillennial Hollywood system can be successfully marketed to, even before the film plays at the postmillennial cineplex, even before the film exists as a fully-formed text.

## Chapter 2

### “I am Iron Man.”: The *Bildungsroman* and Celebrity in the Comic-Book Superhero Film Franchise

*The cinema is truth 24 times per second* — Jean-Luc Godard, *La Petit Soldat*, 1963

“The truth is ...I am Iron Man.” At the very end of *Iron Man* Robert Downey Jr.’s Tony Stark announces his superhero identity to an assembled press corps, who gawk and then click their cameras frenziedly. “I’m Captain America,” states Chris Evans’s Steve Rogers dramatically to freed prisoners of war while portentously heroic music swells in the background of a scene from *Captain America*. “You’re not G[overnment]-Men. You’re more like...X-Men.” The X-Men are only named as such in the closing scenes of *X-Men: First Class*, where the female lead opines on the ultimate allegiance of the extralegal superteam led by James McAvoy’s Professor X. “Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor.” Spoken with affected intonation and inflection by the king of the gods, this line in *Thor* accompanies the return of its titular protagonist’s (as played by Chris Hemsworth) hammer to him; Thor cheats death as a result, the camera pans around to show audiences that his powers and principalities are being resoundingly returned to him.

Why do these assertions of superheroic identity, textually privileged yet seemingly redundant, invariably occur in postmillennial comic-book superhero films? This when considering that producers often cast little-known actors in these roles?<sup>6</sup> Drawing upon the fields of celebrity studies and media industry studies, this chapter proposes a two-part answer to these interlinked questions. It first reads the star narratives of these often little-known actors as appropriately synergizing with the broadly *Bildungsroman*-style, zero-to-hero plots and narratives that these films are concerned with. Where becoming a superhero is presented as the best of all possible careers in the diegetic world of these films, becoming a movie star

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Downey Jr. is the exception which proves the rule.

is similarly argued to be one's highest calling within a postmodern society dominated by the spectacular rhetoric of images. Such a reading will support the second part of this chapter's findings: that this combination of producer strategies is an updating of the oneiric climate which Umberto Eco has compellingly argued to be a structural necessity for texts which operate within the superhero metagenre. These combined strategies are read as treating the superhero as a postmodern star, asserting the primacy of the character — as opposed to the actor — as the primary attraction for the present and future audiences of these franchises.

### **The *Bildungsroman***

The *Bildungsroman* is, as Wilhelm Dithley's classical outline and definition finds:

[An examination of] a regular course of development in the life of the individual; each of the stages has its own value and each is at the same time the basis of a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary transit points of the individual on his way to maturity and harmony. And "the highest happiness of humankind" is the development of the person as the unifying, substantial force of human existence. (trans. in Tennyson 136)

Dithley additionally emphasizes the importance of self-development to the *Bildungsroman*, for it 'aims at the ideal to which we can elevate ourselves through a rigorous education. In between, we observe highlights of the eccentric development of the heroes' (320), and the narrative tone that the text takes towards this ethic of self-development is accordingly optimistic and joyously celebratory. Following Dithley, Feng Pin-Chia adds that the *Bildungsroman* is 'closely connected with traditional heroic narrative ...[and is] derived from the quest motif in which the hero moves teleologically, and the story usually ends with the completion (or failure) of the heroic task.' (2) This hero, the *Bildungsheld*, is often characterised as 'young ...willing to do anything, create in any way, so long as [he is] thoroughly modern, thoroughly whole, thoroughly [himself].' (Castle 2)



All these key structural features of the *Bildungsroman* are manifestly present within the postmillennial comic-book superhero movie. Its superheroic subjects are decades-old multimedia properties, normally possessed of the convoluted and contradictory character arcs and histories that they have inevitably accumulated during this time. Yet, the postmillennial comic-book superhero movie represents these characters as idealistic neophytes to superheroing, who over the course of the movie experience enough character growth such that they are individualistic enough to rise above the stratifying normality of the undifferentiated citizen-subject. They answer the call to participate in their first-ever superheroic adventure, consequently adopting the mantle of superhero, and benefiting their community through their extraordinary deeds and examples. The movie presents these stages of character growth as necessary and (re)presents them in a positive light.

Here then, is Captain America newly transfigured into the blond-haired, blue-eyed, muscular posterboy for the Super-Soldier Serum, throwing his mighty shield to usher out Nazis who have encamped themselves within World War 2's European theatre. Here is Thor, humbled and ennobled by his recent exile to Earth from magical Asgard, valuing peace so much that he will no longer wage unprovoked wars against the Frost Giants. Here is Iron Man, fresh from his change of heart after his experience as a hostage of mad terrorists: no more an amoral war profiteer, he has newly privatized world peace through use of his high-tech armour, and has a new role as a 'genius billionaire playboy philanthropist.' (MARVEL n.p.) Morally respectable onlookers ranging from captured Allied soldiers, feminist astrophysicists, anti-bigotry government agents, and humanist wise old mentors cheer them on all the while. Never mind that these superheroes, in their postmillennial comics alone, are diegetically presented as long-established iconic figures around which revolve major multi-issue, company-wide storylines that are far removed tonally from the *Bildungsroman*. They have fought each other in *Civil War* (Millar and McNiven), have mourned *The Death of*

*Captain America* (Brubaker and Epting) until he got better, have re-united to spearhead a resistance against a world-threatening *Secret Invasion* (Bendis and Yu 2010) by shapeshifting aliens, and have conducted resettlement and reconstruction efforts on behalf of the homeless Norse gods after the cataclysmic *Siege* (Bendis and Coipel 2012) of Asgard. As far as the postmillennial comic-book superhero movie is concerned, these veteran superheroes are instead fresh-faced greenhorns in the first flush of their powers; in every day, in every way, they dedicate themselves to getting better and better.

This strategic doing-away with the complicated character histories of these superheroes ties in well with casting relatively unknown actors as them. As Richard Dyer has argued, film stars implicitly bring their own paratextual star narratives to the films that they star in, ‘signify[ing] in [these] films by virtue of being an already-signifying image’ (88) which is comprised from various ‘media texts that can be [variously categorized] as promotion, publicity, films, criticism, and commentaries.’ (Dyer 60) The construction of a film character, for Dyer, is highly predicated upon the foreknowledge of audiences, for ‘we expect John Wayne to play a certain kind of character’ (109) and accordingly read his character in a currently-unfolding text against previous texts which also involve his star image. Similarly, Justin Wyatt notes in his analysis of pre-millennial blockbuster movies that ‘perhaps the most significant pre-sold property from a commercial standpoint is the human capital, the star, which is attached to a project’ (31) so much so that Hollywood producers find that ‘the hardest kind of film to sell is a film that has no marketable cast.’ (129) He further sees the star’s image as a multifaceted tool, strategically promotable by producers such that it can be recuperated within the film text. (Wyatt 31) The conceits and concerns of films, then, have historically been personified by its lead star(s). Robert Downey Jr.’s well-documented playboy life style and stints in drug rehab made him, for example, an excellent fit for the role of *Iron Man*’s civilian alter-ego, the similarly freewheeling industrialist Tony Stark.

However, Downey Jr. is an exception. Postmillennial comic-book superhero movies tend towards featuring virtually unknown actors in their lead roles. Chris Hemsworth's main claims to fame, prior to *Thor*, consisted of playing Captain Kirk's father in the opening scenes of *Star Trek* (Abrams 2009), and the role of the high-school dropout Kim Hyde on the Australian ensemble soap opera *Home and Away* intermittently between 2004 to 2007. Before becoming Captain America, the highest-profile projects on Chris Evans's similarly scanty dossier were supporting roles on *Fantastic Four* (Story 2005) and *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (Story 2007) as the superhero The Human Torch. Both these movies were badly reviewed, rating 27% and 37% respectively at popular review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes. Reviewers at influential websites such as *The Village Voice* and *Slate* found Evans's performances as the Human Torch 'flatter than [his] two-dimensional counterpart' (Singer n.p.), and 'so forgettable [that] I've had to look his name up three times in the course of writing this review.' (Stevens n.p.) While James McAvoy has a long stage resume, his starring role in the arthouse *The Last King of Scotland* (MacDonald 2006) was accompanied by a limited American release of the film, which eventually only grossed US \$48 million worldwide. His other major role, that of the faun Mr. Tumnus in Walden Media's blockbuster *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Adamson 2005), had him as a quasi-human supporting character obscured under a fake nose, fake hair, and remote-controlled fake ears. McAvoy's name, further, was not on any of the movie posters which Walden Media distributed. Any paratextual star narratives which these actors would have brought to their superhero movies would have, at best, been minimal.

The casting of these relatively unknown actors in leading superhero roles thus presents as an appropriately paratextual synergy with the broadly *Bildungsroman*-style, zero-to-hero plots and narrative that postmillennial comic-book superhero movies are predicated upon. This is especially important in the currently media-saturated era. This era is so concerned with style,

image-making, and the accumulation of fame and stardom that ‘to the extent that organized religion has declined in the West, celebrity culture has emerged as one of the replacement strategies that promote new orders of meaning and solidarity’ (Rojek 99), and that ‘discourses of celebrity [within it] involve all kinds of sites ... from contests in shopping malls looking for pre-teen Britney Spears lookalikes, to the management of major political campaigns.’

(Turner 15) The very obscurity of the leads in postmillennial comic-book superhero movies is readable as an acknowledgment by producers that becoming a famous star is by far the best career path that one can embark upon in such a desacralized world, just as becoming a superhero is the best job that anyone in the comparatively more innocent and morally simplistic diegetic universes of the movies can aspire towards. Steve Rogers’s development-quest from being ‘just a kid from Brooklyn’ (Johnston n.p.), weighing in at an anaemic 90 pounds, to becoming the iconic anti-Nazi Aryan superman that is Captain America can be paralleled with Chris Evans’s evolution. From being an unknown actor, he is now not only the centrepiece of a blockbuster franchise movie, but additionally becoming a high-profile media presence. As of November 2011, concurrent with and following his role as Captain America, Evans has had his picture splashed across billboards the world over, been interviewed by media outlets such as GQ magazine and ABC News, had multiple Captain America toys made in his likeness, and been nominated for Favourite Movie Superhero at the 2012 People’s Choice Awards. His unofficial fan website at [www.chrisrevans.com](http://www.chrisrevans.com) currently taps upon this presence. Despite being online since 2007, it now features a graphical theme and layout which mimics the fantastical World War 2 aesthetic of *Captain America*; its splash page shows Evans in full Captain America costume. Identically stratospheric shifts in career trajectories have been experienced by Chris Hemsworth and James McAvoy, right down to the same Favourite Movie Superhero nomination at the same awards show. Where the subsequent proliferation of media texts around these formerly unknown actors reinforce the

notion that the superhero-subject has become transfigured into someone of worth and distinction, the (near-) *tabulae rasae* of star images and narratives that these lead actors bring to their associated superhero movies, in their turn, emphasize the idea that the pre-superhero subject is a nobody within his diegetic universe.

“The truth is ...I am Iron Man.” “I am Captain America.” “You’re ...X-Men.” These and other similar assertions of superheroic identity thus come across as moments in which producers signal to audiences that the neophyte leading characters of these movies have progressed sufficiently well along on their *Bildungsroman*-style character arcs. These characters are now newly worthy of the mantle of superhero, and of all the power and distinction which the term connotes. The associated dramatic touches, in keeping with the *Bildungsroman*’s tradition, celebrate this character development, and additionally signal that these neophyte superheroes are presently operating/ will henceforth operate under such a mantle. These celebratory assertions also play upon the lack of foreknowledge and expectations that mass audiences have with regard to the existing star narratives of James McAvoy and company. They tie in well with the rapid rise to stardom that the production and marketing of these movies have facilitated for their once-obscure lead actors, adding a veneer of real-world truth and authenticity to the movie. Even the veteran actor Robert Downey Jr.’s utterance of “I am Iron Man” can be read as him having conquered his personal demons and triumphantly returning to the Hollywood A-list as the star of a big-budget summer blockbuster. While asserting their on-screen identity as Iron Man, or as Captain America, or as an X-Man, the actors may as well be saying on another level that “I am now a star. I am now a multimedia property. I have made it.”

Two problems, however, remain. Direct and dramatic statements of identity such as these are not in most *Bildungsroman*. In the seminal *Bildungsroman* text, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, young Wilhelm ends his story by saying ‘I know not the worth of a

kingdom ...but I know I have attained a happiness which I have not deserved, and which I would not change with anything in life.’ (385) Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* is similarly without an “I am Philip Pirrip.” While Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* declares at the end that he has become ‘Richard Hunter, Esq.’ (128), most of the heroes of Alger’s other mid-nineteenth-century formulaic poor-boy-makes-good stories, such as Luke of 1868’s *Luke Larkin’s Luck*, Rodney of 1893’s *Cast Upon the Breakers*, and Frank of 1879’s *The Telegraph Boy* do not restate their identity at the end of their stories. Further, while postmillennial superhero movies can be generically classified as action movies, this style of statement is not commonplace within the genre. *Die Hard*’s (McTiernan 1988) John McClane instead refers to ‘us Americans ...[as] cowboys’ (McTiernan n.p.) when winning a gun duel with a major terrorist figure. *The Rock*’s (Bay 1996) Dr. Goodspeed is only hailed as such in passing by an Army officer who later harangues him in frustration. ‘Goodspeed, where’s Mason? Where’s his body? I wanna see that son of a bitch!’ (Bay n.p.) And it is only in *Casino Royale* (Campbell 2006) — over twenty movies into the Bond franchise — that its rebooted iteration of James Bond asserts that ‘The name is Bond. James Bond’ (Campbell n.p.) at the movie’s end.

### **Multimedia Multiplicity**

Secondly, for all these textually-privileged assertions, Robert Downey Jr. is not actually Iron Man. Nor are his compatriots really Captain America, or Batman, or Thor. These superheroes are concepts, the centrepieces of long-running character-driven commodity-franchises. These commodity-franchises were conceived long before these formerly-unknown actors were even born. The movies these actors star in — as big-budget, heavily-promoted, and widely-released as they are — may currently occupy a privileged space at the top of the intertextual and paratextual hierarchies which circulate around the individual superhero franchise, and may indeed linger on as key texts within the franchise due to their copious

amounts of spin-off merchandising. Yet, these movies and their associated characters and actors are ultimately but a single iteration of the character concept that drives the superhero commodity-franchise. Here, Henry Jenkins's observations regarding the practices of postmillennial superhero comic-book industry producers spring to mind. Jenkins finds that these producers have embraced the principle of narrative multiplicity, simultaneously creating multiple comics in which feature differing riffs on the core version of any given superhero:

Today, comics have entered a period where principles of multiplicity are felt at least as powerfully as those of continuity. Under this new system, readers may consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character, different understandings of their relationships with the secondary figures, different moral perspectives, exploring different moments in their lives, and so forth. So that in some storylines, Aunt May knows Spider-Man's secret identity while in others she doesn't; in some Peter Parker is still a teen and in others, he is an adult science teacher; in some, he is married to Mary Jane and in others, they have broken up, and so forth. (Jenkins, "Tights" 21)

Jenkins adds that this shift towards narrative multiplicity displaces, but is not meant to eradicate, narrative continuity. Rather, the strategy of narrative multiplicity is meant to complement that of narrative continuity, 'so that we do not lose interest in having compelling stories within individual issues as we move into the continuity era nor do comics readers and producers lose interest in continuity as we enter into a period of multiplicity.' (21) By way of example, *Marvel 1602* (Gaiman and Kubert 2003) is an alternate narrative universe in which Marvel superheroes originate from, and adventure in, Elizabethan England instead of present-day America. It later spawned the related titles *Marvel 1602: New World* (Pak and Tocchini 2006) and *Marvel 1602: Fantastick Four*. (David and Alixe 2007) At no time during the original *1602*'s eight-month run did the regular adventures of superheroes in the main Marvel Universe — a narrative continuity designated as Universe 616 — cease publication, nor were any already-existing adventures invalidated by the *1602*-brand titles. Jenkins sees these

intertwined strategies as beneficial ones. Where solely focusing on narrative continuity does privileges fans who have faithfully consumed the (very) long-running stories of comic-book superheroes month after month, ‘it might also act as a barrier to entry for new readers who often found continuity-heavy books difficult to follow. [However,] the contemporary focus on multiplicity may similarly reward the mastery of longtime fans but around a different axis of consumption.’ (Jenkins, “Tights” 21) In other words, the longtime fan will be able to appreciate the arresting differences between each iteration of the superhero, while new readers are not lost when comic-books reference stories that take place in previously-published issues.

While this combination of continuity and multiplicity came about as a result of well-established superhero brands and a saturated comic-books market, such an interlocking double logic is extendable towards postmillennial comic-book superhero films as well. With regard to continuity, Martyn Pedler finds that the story of how a superhero became a superhero — his origin story — ‘explains everything that anybody will ever need to know about the character. Why he does what he does and why he is who he is.’ (9) The retelling of each superhero’s formative origin story in these widely-released and well-attended films thus not only provides a convenient entry point for new audiences, but also lays the groundwork for future film sequels and spin-offs which also involve the same and familiar iteration of this superhero. *Captain America 2*, set to be released in 2014, does not yet even have a director. However, its writers already say that they intend to continue on from the endings of *Captain America* and *The Avengers*, which see the superhero revived to fight evil in contemporary times. “We made a movie where the world was in context for [Captain America]. ...Now he's in the now, and there is nothing black-and-white. So you're given this huge new palate to work with, but you can keep him the same.” (Lesnick n.p.) Narrative continuity, even at this early stage of development, is conceived of as an attraction for the putative audiences of



*Captain America 2*: they'll get to experience the further adventures of Chris Evans's Captain America in it, and thus perhaps be collectively persuaded to at least equal the first movie's US \$300 million-plus box-office gross. (The Numbers n.p.)

And with regard to multiplicity, producers can use the filmic iteration of the superhero as a gateway for audiences to consume other iterations of the superhero. The postmillennial Marvel comic-book superhero film, for instance, is set in a diegetic universe called the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This Cinematic Universe, despite having similarities to the Universe 616 of the comics, is meant to be a separate narrative continuity from it. As such, the July 2011 release of *Captain America* was heralded during the previous month by comics such as *Captain America: First Vengeance #1* (van Lente and Ross) which, tying-in directly with the film, were distinctively solicited as 'The OFFICIAL comics prequel to the Marvel Studios summer blockbuster.' (CBR News Team n.p., emphasis in original) The very end of June 2011 itself, however, also saw the release of *Captain America: Rebirth #1* (Lee and Kesel), reprints of early comics in which 'as the evils of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party spread across Europe, Steve Rogers becomes the legendary Captain America! With his sidekick, Bucky, and under the direction of Franklin Roosevelt himself, Cap battles the diabolical Red Skull on every front!' (CBR News Team n.p.) With its exclamation-point-laden syntax and bright primary colours, *Captain America: Rebirth* is tonally and aesthetically different from the everyday American English and the muted sepia film tint which characterise Captain America. Nor is Franklin Roosevelt present in the latter. But an iteration of Captain America is eminently present in the film, as are iterations of Bucky and the Red Skull. And the latter three are all present in both the continuing Universe 616 stories *Captain America #620* (Brubaker and Samnee) and *Fear Itself #4* (Fraction and Immonen), which were also released in conjunction with the Cinematic Universe film. These similar-

enough markers of familiarity, shared across multiple narrative continuities and media platforms, allow producers to maximise their profits from the same core intellectual property.

It is these notions of continuity and iterative multiplicity that point to the notion of the superheroes of these films having a virtual life outside of the cineplex. Despite being a fictional concept with neither an actual birth certificate nor a Social Security number, these superheroes have accumulated character histories. They are regularly featured on different media platforms, upon which they behave similarly-yet-differently enough. They are further presented as signifiers of extraordinariness, and thus as a point of interest deserving the attention of audiences. They are recognizable due to their continued (largely) favourable coverage in the media. Their presence endorses texts and products, locating them within specific regimes of quality and pleasures, and this feeds, Ouroboros-like, into these superheroes once again being featured regularly on different media platforms. In sum, these notions of continuity and iterative multiplicity point to these superheroes as being what Chris Rojek has termed “celeactors”. (23)

### **Celeactors and Synthespians**

In keeping with the rapid development of graphical and information technologies, the body of academic literature surrounding the virtual production of celebrities has multiplied. Chris Rojek’s influential work on contemporary celebrity draws from and updates the Shakespearean observation that there exist three broad categories of great people: those who happen to be born great, those who achieve greatness and those who have greatness thrust upon them. He finds that in the category of those who have had greatness concentrated and attributed upon them, there exists the “celeactor”, ‘a fictional character who is either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutional feature of popular culture. ...adjuncts of the mass media. They cater to the public appetite for a character type that sums up the times.’

(Rojek 23) He further states that these celeactors are intimations of a better, gentler utopia, for they are ‘invariably satirical creations. Their purpose is to deflate the sanctimony of public figures or to highlight allegations of moral bankruptcy in public life.’ (Rojek 24) Rojek even specifically singles out Superman and Batman as celeactors, finding that their character-franchises in sum ‘present idealized representations of American heroism and the defence of justice.’ (25) Captain America and his cineplex contemporaries can in this vein thus be provisionally classified as celeactors as well. For all that they are fictional, they are recognizable. They can be associated with specific iconographies and practices, and are accessible and more importantly re-accessible through many media platforms. Their just-begun/ never-ending fight for truth and justice symbolically addresses and resolves tensions pertinent to the ages that they were (re)created in, such as Nazi invasions and terrorist threats.

Rojek’s work exists alongside related research on the rise of the virtual celebrity, or “synthespian”. (Creed 159) In the 1960s, Andre Bazin wrote of the early cinema as being inspired by the then-recent Industrial Revolution’s concern with developing methods and technologies to mechanically reproduce and represent reality, for as in cases as wide-ranging from photography to the phonograph, the early cinema traded in ‘an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time.’ (21) But the contemporary virtual celebrity — born from multiple media platforms — has no such integral realism. What it has, rather, are lines of computer code and Photoshop effects masking its artificiality. As Jean Baudrillard would doubtlessly find, it is a simulacral being of the third order, a copy which despite having a lost/ non-existent original referent — or at best exists only in the minds of its

audience-consumers — adroitly continues to circulate in the contemporary mediascape.<sup>7</sup>  
(454-55)

Accordingly, Barbara Creed, in relation to the representative function of the contemporary cinema, questions the need for reality as original referent. She opines that ‘the power of technology to alter reality has always been an integral part of the cinema process. ...the crucial issues are less to do with reality than with communication.’ (Creed 165) She further finds that the virtual celebrity has potential ‘to epitomise a digitised form of beauty that is flawless ...offer[ing] an idealised image as the basis for spectator identification’ (Creed 168-71) perhaps in a better way than human stars will ever be able to. Mary Flanagan is even more utopian in her outlook. She considers synthespians as a natural evolution of the contemporary era’s mediated celebrity culture, where the body of the star must necessarily function as a widely-circulated disembodied image to achieve fame. This body-image, then, is ‘generally mediated, accessible only through media, and always perfect. ...the non-corporeal digital star is [accordingly] a perfect match to a technology of representation and subjectivities that mediate our experience.’ (17) Flanagan concludes that these synthespians ‘will begin to have more than image appeal. They [will] appeal instead to a new sense of ‘agency’ — yet always an agency directed to the fulfilment of our fantasies.’ (20) While Flanagan was specifically talking about how the videogame avatar enables its controllers to safely and masterfully act out power fantasies such as tomb raiding or street fighting, her discussion of agency and fantasy-fulfilment can be extended to the multimedia franchises that center around the superheroes of postmillennial comic book films. Purveying easily-available

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<sup>7</sup> To extend the point on simulacra, in the 21st century, part of the narrative of every comic book superhero multimedia text invariably engages with those other fictional texts which have come before. As Angela Ndalianis writes, television incarnations of Superman participate in ‘an intense dialogic engagement with the codes that comprise the Superman movie universe ...becom[ing] one of many Superman realities that occupy a multiverse of possibilities.’ (270) She also notes that these media offer an appealing illusion of life for their audiences, exhorting these audiences to wilfully suspend their disbelief; the fact that superheroes exist ‘in the memory of their readers mean[s] that they [are] real’ (282) for a given, simulacral value of ‘real’.

fetishized commodities, these superhero multimedia franchises afford consumers the agency to consume more stories and ancillary products featuring a favourite (iteration of) a superhero, even if across multiple platforms. This cross-platform consumption allows consumers a false and pleasing fantasy of empowerment; they have, of their own volition, successfully navigated different media and wound up with extended access to/ knowledge of the superhero.

These conceptions of simulacral celeactors and idealized synthesians are important because, as Scott Bukatman has shown, the hyperbolic physical or mental abilities of superheroes point to the metagenre's underlying concern with the body as a splintered locus of transformation and identity. Superhero comics 'narrate the body in stories and envision the body in drawings. The body is obsessively centred upon. ... The superhero body is everything — a corporeal, rather than cognitive, mapping of the subject into a cultural system.'

(Bukatman 49) It is such an obsession with the body that has allowed superheroes to embody 'shifting attitudes towards flesh, self, and society' (Bukatman 51) ranging from them being initially being 'armoured against the shocks of industrial society ... [shifting to incarnating] problematic and painfully reductive definitions of masculine power and presence' (Bukatman 51) during the mid 90s. Regardless of these shifting attitudes, though, the ideal body in the metagenre's narratives is one that must be flawless; in this is the character development of the *Bildungsroman* made spectacularly apparent. It is Superman — square-jawed, barrel-chested, dark hair artfully spit-curved — that comic-books typically cast in the role of hero, not the bald and middle-aged Lex Luthor. This superheroic body must remain healthy and vital. It must not be seen to age, and when it dies, as happened in (among countless other instances) *The Death of Captain America*, can only do so for a while. *Captain America: Reborn* (Brubaker and Hitch 2010) soon followed this little death, joining titles such as *Absolute Batman and Robin: Batman Reborn* (Morrison and Quitely 2012), *The Death and*

*Return of Superman* (Stern and Jurgens 2007), and *Heroes Reborn: Iron Man* (Lobdell and Lee 2006)

For all that *Captain America* and *Thor* featured shots which lingered on the nude, muscled torsos of Chris Evans and Chris Hemsworth — the trailer for *Captain America* is particularly amusing with its showcasing of a female secret agent reaching out, in a combination of disbelief and arousal, to touch the good Captain's bulging pectorals — the youth and strength of these actors will be fleeting. In a July 2011 media interview, Evans admits that the physical workouts which prepared him for the Captain America role left him needing to vomit, and alludes to not being in superheroic shape any more, for he has 'a fast metabolism and ...lose[s] weight very quickly.' (Miller n.p.) Similarly, Hemsworth mentions that he followed a strict exercise regime and diet plan to gain 10 kg of muscle mass for his role, and that he had shed most of this muscle by the time that *Thor* was in theatres. (Buzzsugar n.p.) The star narratives that an aging, less muscular Evans and Hemsworth — who would presumably also have accumulated a larger body of acting work by then — would bring to putative future instalments (five years, ten years, twenty years) of their respective superhero franchises would then sharply be at odds with not only the endlessly recirculating iconography of these specific superheroes as peak physical specimens, but divulging from the body-worshipping core ethic of the metagenre as well.<sup>8</sup> Multiplicity only goes so far.

Featuring an aged Captain America or an old Thor in blockbuster movies meant to be the

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<sup>8</sup> This is especially since postmillennial superhero movies fetishize their networks of narrative continuity, where continuity has to be maintained with as little disruption as possible. Changing the actor who played Bruce Banner in between the Hulk movies and *The Avengers* — although these movies are diegetically set close to one another in the same Cinematic Universe — seems to have been an effectual strategy since it was the CGI Hulk's body who was the focus of *The Avengers*'s action scenes, and since it was Robert Downey Jr's Tony Stark character who was the focus/ anchor of the majority of *The Avengers*'s non-action ones. Recasting Downey Jr with a different actor, on the other hand, would have been problematic in light of the popular Iron Man movies and their tighter links to the overall Cinematic Universe than the Hulk movies. One notes that the recasting of Andrew Garfield as Spider-Man in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Webb 2012) was accompanied by the movie being diegetically set in a separate and alternate narrative continuity from the Tobey Maguire/ Sam Raimi trilogy.

flagship texts of a superhero franchise would thus not cast these superheroes in a flatteringly similar-but-different light. Rather, they'd be unpleasantly *unheimlich*, especially considering that future movies would have to appeal to a new generation of fan-consumers in an entertainment industry which has traditionally successfully harnessed images of youth for its appeal.

### **Men Out of Time**

The commonplace casting of unknown actors as the leads in postmillennial comic-book films, then, is thus presentable as the latest attempt by the producers of superhero texts to profitably engage with the conveniently oneiric climate which characterises the metagenre. In 1961, Umberto Eco analysed about 200 issues of the long-running *Superman* and *Action Comics* comic books to argue that the superhero exists within an oneiric climate which operates contrary to classical and rational notions of time as a linear event-narrative. These linear conceptions have the idea of time intertwined alongside that of causal succession, with what has happened 'before causally determining after, and the series of these determinations [as untraceable and irreversible]' (Eco 16). Time is here seen as a 'structure of possibility' (Eco 17), which allows its subjects to 'mov[e] towards a future, having behind [them] a past' (Eco 17). In other words, event A precipitates event B, which in turn begets event C, all the way ad infinitum, with its subjects eternally unable to re-visit earlier points along this continuum. One cannot travel back in time to punch Hitler, nor stop time to prevent a neo-Nazi rally from ever occurring.

By contrast, the notion of linear time breaks down in Eco's *Superman* comic strips. An individual story is not referenced once completed, for if 'it took Superman up again at the point where he left off, he would have taken a step toward death' (Eco 17). This is especially important since 'Superman has been around since 1938 ...the public would realize the

comicality of the situation, as happened in the case of Little Orphan Annie, who prolonged her disaster-ridden childhood for decades' (Eco 17). Rather, the Superman of these succeeding stories simply performs, in peak physical prime, the same crime-fighting heroic function that he does in the earlier stories. He is unaware both of the similar events that have occurred in previous stories, and of the similar events that will occur again in the future. In effect, Superman exists as the hero of an eternally revolving cyclic narrative, where events recur and recur again. The time-space in which he operates, thus, is essentially a mutable dreamscape:

The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate — of which the reader is not aware at all — where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said. (Eco 17)

The style of storytelling in superhero comics has changed drastically since Eco's observation. The titles of Eco's day were primarily targeted at children and adolescents. They were transient products *par excellence*, typically printed with cheap paper and ink, and sold cheaply at locations such as newsstands or drugstores, 'much more likely to end up yellowed, torn, and used as source material for Silly Putty imprints rather than for research purposes' (Pedler 1). These audiences could thus quickly consume a complete adventure within the space of a train or bus ride. *Captain America Comics #1* (Simon and Kirby 1941), for example, has Captain America starring in four separate and complete adventures within its forty-five pages; he ingests the Super-Soldier Serum to become 'the first of a corps of super-agents whose mental and physical ability will make them a terror to spies and saboteurs!' (5), then fights an undercover Nazi fortune-teller, thirdly smashes a Nazi spy ring, and finally defeats an early iteration of the Red Skull. By contrast, the long-running Universe 616 title was re-launched after the 2011 blockbuster movie, and the twenty-four pages of the new



*Captain America #1* (Brubaker and McNiven 2011) reads as the first part of the first act of a serial story; in contemporary times, Captain America attends the funeral of his World War 2 love interest (who was hardly referenced in contemporary *Captain America* comics until around the advent of the movie), and supervillians elsewhere plot their vendetta against him.

Decompressed storytelling — where a single main plotline unfolds over multiple issues — is thus now the idiom which dominates comic-books, for these products now target late-teenage to adult readers, and producers now tend to bind individual related comic-book issues together into collected trade paperbacks soon after the initial publication of these issues.

There is an apparently stronger focus on narrative continuity. The following month's issue continues the story that *#1* started, and so on up until concluding in early 2012. Subsequent and inevitable issues will build upon these events. But the forward-progressing narrative continuity that the decompressed mode offers is only illusory. The Universe 616-shaking crossover event for 2007, *Civil War*, was predicated on Iron Man and Captain America vehemently opposing each other's ideologies so much so that they were brawling in (nigh-)mortal combat which indirectly led to Captain America's death. As of 2012, though, the pair are now friends again. Captain America returned from the dead, and together they led the Avengers during the *Siege* of Asgard. These superheroes have essentially returned to the narrative point they were at prior to 2007. The dreams may now take longer to recycle, but the oneiric climate still characterizes superhero adventures.

The Cinematic Universe's approach to continuity and the oneiric climate falls somewhere in between that of these two eras of comic-books. Each individual movie is a self-contained adventure, but will build upon plot threads that were advanced during preceding movies in the universe, and will in turn introduce new plot threads to be advanced upon during

succeeding Cinematic Universe outings.<sup>9</sup> *Captain America*, for example, fleshes out the character of Howard Stark. Briefly seen in *Iron Man 2* as a middle-aged industrialist, he is portrayed here as a daredevil aviator who assists Captain America during World War 2. *Captain America* further expands upon the powers of the Cosmic Cube, a wish-granting artifact previously liberated from the Frost Giants in *Thor* which will feature as a doomsday weapon in the upcoming *The Avengers*.

This second move is oddly appropriate. The Avengers will undoubtedly save the Cinematic Universe from the Cube, but this universe remains one which must ultimately end. As of December 2011, Marvel had not yet formally announced further movies beyond 2013's *Thor 2* (Taylor), Chris Evans has mentioned that his contract spans six movies, though, which he believes will be split between a Captain America trilogy and an Avengers trilogy, and has informally confirmed that *Captain America 2* will be released in 2014. (Total Film n.p.) But what happens after this sixth movie? Considering that five years that lapsed between the release of 2008's *Iron Man* and 2012's *The Avengers*, and that *The Avengers 2* will release in late 2014 at the very earliest, *The Avengers 3* is likely to release in either late 2018 or 2019. At least eight years will have thus passed in real-time since *Captain America* and *The Avengers 3*. With the superhero metagenre obsessively and oneirically focused on perfect bodies and eternal youth as it is, an aging Evans would be an increasingly bad fit for later Cinematic Universe movies. Even Warner Brothers's DC Comics movie division seems to realise this, with the director and lead actor for the financially successful postmillennial film iteration of Batman constantly re-iterating in interviews that *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan

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<sup>9</sup> This practice of serialization in films, where the narrative is extended across several films, is distinct from classical-era Hollywood practices, where films offered self-contained, standalone narratives, even as the film's characters continued to reappear in new films. One recalls the Andy Hardy film series which ran between the late 1930s and the late 1950s, where the driving narrative concern of each of the seventeen films — for instance the discovery of aluminium deposits, or the arrival of an sympathetically impoverished elderly couple, or Andy Hardy having trouble with schoolwork — is not foreshadowed in previous episodes, and only mentioned briefly (if at all) in later episodes.

2012) will not only be diegetically set eight years after the previous two films — roughly corresponding to, and acknowledging the real-world years which will have passed between the first one, *Batman Begins*, and *Rises* — but will be the last film for that particular cycle.

But since the real-world purpose of the superhero is to be a franchise which profitably and constantly generates commodities for its consumers to purchase, it needs to be reworkable and re-presentable for its current and (more importantly) future audiences. As Fredric Jameson finds, an ethos of commodity fetishism dominates postmodern society, so much so that narrative itself is hypercommodified. (130) Where older adventure tales can be broken down into combinations of signs which were deployed to create excitement and sustain reader interest, ‘this is still a relatively primitive stage in the commodification of narrative.’ (Jameson 133) For the various popular ‘sagas [of contemporary media outlets] can be seen as so many commodities towards whose consumption the narratives are little more than means, their essential materiality then being confirmed and embodied in the movie music that accompanies their screen versions.’ (133)

As such, it is the celeactor, not the human actor portraying it, who is of paramount importance to the franchise. The titles of these movies make this focus explicit. They are not the abstracted summary-promises of the comics like *Siege* or *Civil War*. Rather, they simply state the superhero’s name or superhero team’s name as the movie’s title. *Iron Man*. *Captain America*. *X-Men: First Class*. *The Avengers*. *The Dark Knight Rises* is as abstract as one gets for superhero film titles, and even this abstraction rides upon the superhero’s name value as its selling point. It is the celeactor, then, who is the real star of these movies, not Chris Evans, nor Chris Hemsworth, nor James McAvoy. Were Iron Man and Captain America to fight one another in the Cinematic Universe, that particular film would not be titled *Civil War*. It would be titled *The Avengers 2*, or *Iron Man Vs. Captain America*. At the level of narrative, world-shaking threats may come and go, and alliances may be forged or be broken. Yet, these

scenarios must remain a secondary attraction. It is the superhero, at the level of the franchise-commodity, who must remain a clear and present fetish-object for audiences, with threats in the film's diegesis marketed as being centred around it, not the other way around.

An unknown actor — or one whose star is on the wane — is thus indeed cheap labour who, appropriately for producers, allows the appealing zero-to-hero conceit of the *Bildungsroman* to be paratextually articulated through his previous lack of a strong surrounding star narrative. More pertinent to this casting choice, though, is the fact that he is a usefully disposable tool for asserting the primacy of the celeactor — as opposed to the actor — as the key attraction for the audiences of these accordingly bluntly-titled superhero film franchises. It is the superhero celeactor, much more so than the previously-unknown actor, that Marvel wants audiences to be familiar with, after all. “I am Iron Man”, and other similar statements thus read as signposts which not only articulate the celeactor's desirability, but further signpost audiences to other texts in the franchise, blatantly promising that these other texts will re-articulate the pleasures that were present in the blockbuster film.

This is especially so since a Second Cinematic Universe will inevitably follow the end of the current one. This new Universe is adroitly possible in the updated oneiric climate of postmillennial comic-book superhero films, and in the spirit of multiplicity that characterizes the postmillennial comic-book superhero. The point of the superhero celeactor, then, is not that he is played by any particular Hollywood star, nor that he is tied to any historical moment beyond the ever-shifting “present-day”. (The only exceptions, perhaps, are Captain America and the X-Men's Magneto, and even then their past experiences — during World War 2, during the Cuban Missile Crisis — are clearly demarcated as a separate sphere from the “present-day” within which they primarily operate.) Where, for example, the Iron Man of the comics originally forged his armour when he was captured during the Vietnam War of the 1960s, the movie has him captured by Middle Eastern terrorists during the post-9/11 era.

Similarly, Captain America was indeed frozen during the last days of World War 2, but he awakens “now” — in the four-colour pages of the 1960s Marvel Renaissance, in the 3-D postmillennial blockbuster film — as a man out of his own time. As Eco mentions, time in superhero adventures is essentially an unstable construct. Timelines float, such that ancillary details about these superheroes are being elided or embellished all the time. (15)

Rather, the point of the superhero celeactor is that he is an ahistorical figure and concept, which can be deployed by his producers as an articulation of whichever particular valencies of heroism are celebrated by society at the date of deployment. Equally key is that he has to be seen transitioning from the undifferentiated Everyman to the famous Superman, and as such has to be seen performing superheroic deeds which are largely consistent with whichever parameters have already been established by the preceding franchise. As such, no matter when the superhero is reawakened or reforged, his *Bildungsroman*-style hero-journey — which has already been experienced by audiences in the past of the faux-Elizabethan *1602* comics, the “now” of the current Cinematic Universe films, and earlier still in the “now” of the 1960s — is thus easily repeatable with a second unknown actor in the lead role of neophyte superhero.

## **Conclusion**

“The truth is ...I am Iron Man.” “I am Captain America.” “You’re ...X-Men.” These are statements as complex as they are blatant. On one hand, they allow the producers of postmillennial comic-book superhero films to signal to audiences that the formerly undistinguished lead characters of these films have experienced positive character development, and are now supermen, mirroring the real-world ascent to fame that these films have afforded their formerly obscure actors. At the same time, these statements mesh well with the updated oneiric and ahistorical climate surrounding the superhero metagenre. In a

metagenre and industry which both celebrate celeactors in their physical prime so much so that these celeactors never seem to age, the unknown actor is a usefully disposable tool. He is easily replaceable with another when the current film cycle involving the superhero ends, and a new one begins. Further, his lack of paratextual star narrative asserts that it is the character — as opposed to the actor — who is the primary attraction for the present and future audiences of the superhero franchise. “Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor” indeed.

### Chapter 3

#### **X-Men Revolutions: The Byronic Hero and Trauma in *X-Men: First Class***

“What is new in all of this is that the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction.” – Jean-François Lyotard

The latest film in the X-Men franchise, *X-Men: First Class*, was well-received by popular audiences and critics. It has an 87% approval rating at popular film review aggregator Rottentomatoes.com and grossed US \$353 million in total box-office receipts. The young Erik Lensherr’s declaration that ‘you can call [him] Magneto’ (Vaughn 2011) at *First Class*’s end, however, might come as a surprise in light of the previous chapter’s findings. This is all the more so because it trumps the scene directly before, where the X-Men are christened as such. The aged Magneto, after all, serves as the supervillain antagonist of the X-Men film franchise’s main trilogy. This declaration, further, comes after the plot and narrative of *First Class* present Magneto as a deeply compelling figure. A scene of him as a child victim of Nazi war atrocities begins *First Class*. Elsewhere in the film, Magneto mourns his dead mother, and embarks on a proto-James Bond solo adventure hunting down Nazis. In one of *First Class*’s climatic scenes, when Magneto uses his telekinetic control over metal to bombard American and Soviet fleets with missiles, audiences have been given ample grounds to cheer him on. The missiles are ones that the Americans and the Soviets — each other’s mortal enemies in *First Class*’s Cold War setting — have fired upon the film’s lead characters as thanks for them having successfully prevented a nuclear apocalypse.

Why did the producers of *First Class* choose to give a future supervillain such a sympathetic focus, essentially banking on him to revitalize future instalments of the ailing X-Men film franchise as a lead character? In answer to this question, this chapter not only contextualizes

*First Class* against the problematic history of the overall X-Men multimedia franchise, but also against the contemporary popularity of the Byronic hero, and additionally against Jean-François Lyotard's concept of iconoclastic little narratives. The structural amnesia that has traditionally characterised serial storytelling is, considering that *First Class*'s simultaneously has a liminal narrative status as prequel to/ reboot of the X-Men film franchise, necessarily also reconsidered in this chapter.

### **The X-Men Franchise**

The X-Men franchise's core appeal is that it showcases the visually spectacular struggles of superpowered individuals who take the moral high ground despite being marked or hailed as Other by right-thinking members of society. Over the last five decades of multiple narrative continuities, the X-Men have saved the Marvel Universes from evildoers ranging the gamut from aliens, to sorcerers, to terrorists. This heroism is despite the fact that — as Marvel Comics often reiterates in publications such as Peter Sanderson's *Ultimate X-Men* guide book — most inhabitants of these diegetic universes invariably regard 'mutants as dangerous freaks, threatening the existence of the normal human race.' (Sanderson 9) Key long-running storylines in the X-Men franchise, accordingly, involve the *Days of Future Past* (Claremont and Byrne) and the *Age of Apocalypse* (Lobdell and Garney). These are two different possible futures of the Marvel Universe which exaggerate the franchise's structuring conceit of heroism in the face of institutional discrimination. Both futures involve the imprisonment and culling of mutants who are either intrinsically undesirable Others to the machineries of the totalitarian state, or who fall out of favour with it. These are storylines that have been referenced and revisited in many subsequent X-Men texts — the most recent is 2011's *X-Force: The Dark Angel Saga* (Remender and Opena), a comic-book arc which continues the story of the *Age* — and both are storylines in which Magneto is positioned as a leader-figure to the X-Men. In *Days*, he is — uncannily enough considering his complex and often



antagonistic friendship with the paraplegic Professor X — a wheelchair-bound guru in a concentration camp. In *Age*, his battle-scarred rebel alliance is humanity's last hope against a genocidal dictator's globe-spanning empire. Such an uneasy relationship with the institutional powers that be — unlike the examples of Iron Man or Captain America, whose similarly heroic actions result in them being concurrently feted as exemplary figures by this same society — afford the X-Men their own evolutionary niche in the superhero canon.

This niche has often proven to be a hugely profitable one. The X-Men franchise is an established touchstone of pop culture. In addition to *First Class*, this franchise consists of four previous big-budget blockbuster films, three long-running cartoons, Japanese *anime* videogames, toys, trading cards, and volumes upon volumes of comic-books. For all this ubiquity, however, the franchise has failed catastrophically twice since its inception in the summer of 1963 as a comic-book. This comic-book was ‘in its first decade, far from being a fan favourite ...[and] a commercial failure.’ (Sanderson 12) It was almost cancelled within its first decade of publication. Later, in the mid-90s, the franchise became a liability for Marvel ‘as the speculative bubble burst in both the comics market and the trading card business.’ (Johnson, “Franchise” 21) X-Men-branded products were no longer conceived of as potential money-spinners. Rather, they represented ‘multiple chances at failure.’ (Johnson, “Franchise” 21) Despite being a major brand for Marvel, the X-Men were unable to save Marvel from a US \$464 million loss in 1996, and bankruptcy soon afterwards. (Johnson, “Franchise” 21)

It is the X-Men franchise's track record of failure that Derek Johnson explores when he considers the challenges of franchising as a strategy for multimedia producers. For Johnson, these failures provide a blueprint for thinking of multimedia franchises as embattled cultural processes as opposed to cultural products, ‘as a process of convergence wherein a multiplicity of texts, institutions, and historical contexts collide, leading to uneven experimentation, challenge, and failure.’ (Johnson, “Franchise” 14) Compromises and reconfigurations —

whether by expanding the product line to squeeze out perennial rival DC Comics or by relaunching the franchise with an all-new, all-different cast of characters— were, for Johnson, the key to the X-Men’s successes in the wake of these failures. (“Franchise” 12-14) The franchise, in Johnson’s analysis, ultimately ‘evinces the imperfect negotiation through which culture industries have managed collusions of institution and context through content.’ (“Franchise” 15) The film adaptation rights to the X-Men are in the control of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox as opposed to Marvel. However, considering that *First Class* is yet part of the larger X-Men franchise, a consideration of the texts that surround it — albeit with more focus on the preceding 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox films which *First Class* is most closely related to — will help account for its engendering of audience sympathy for Magneto.

This is especially since the X-Men film franchise experienced both its highest increase in profit and its greatest popular critical acclaim in *X2: X-Men United* (Singer 2003), two film entries and eight years before *First Class*. *X2* has an 88% approval rating at Rottentomatoes.com, and grossed US\$ 407 million at the worldwide box office. This latter figure represents a US\$ 110 million increase over the *X-Men* (Singer 2000) title which preceded *X2*, but only US\$7 million less than the *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Ratner 2007), and US\$34 million more than the *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (Hood 2009) entries which followed it. This was despite *Last Stand*’s US\$210 million production budget making it almost twice as expensive as *X2*’s US\$110 million one, and the most expensive film ever at the time of its release. Concordantly, Rottentomatoes.com’s approval ratings for *X-Men*, *Last Stand*, and *Origins* stand at 82%, 57%, and 37% respectively. Before *First Class*, thus, the X-Men film franchise was, while not a financially ruinous liability in the same way that its parent texts had once been for its original copyright owner, had become an ailing one. One of the film franchise’s chief producers, Lauren Donner, guardedly articulates this sentiment in a 2011 interview when asked about the box office performance of *Origins*:

You know, I don't think there's a movie that any producer does that they don't wish it would do better. Even though it does well. So I'm glad that we did \$56 [million]. I'm grateful for whatever we did, honestly! ...[We want] to distinguish [the upcoming *Origins* sequel, simply titled *The Wolverine*] from [*Origins*]. It's much more of a standalone. (in Eggertsen n.p.)

These symptoms of failure, and of ailment, demand that the X-Men film franchise's producers attempt a renegotiation and repair of the franchise in its subsequent film instalments. This is especially since *Origins* was the nadir for the franchise. *Origins* focused on the backstory of the titular Wolverine, who was the lead character for the previous four films, and who was the breakout character during the X-Men title's revival in 1975's *Giant-Size X-Men #1*. (Wein and Cockrum) Introduced in *Giant* as a clawed former secret agent with the Canadian military who had problems with authority, Wolverine was envisioned by a later artist as 'Dirty Harry with a Canadian accent.' (in Wright 265) His anti-authoritarian characterization served as an exaggeration and intensification of his ineffable Otherness. This was not least since he had an antagonistic relationship with the team's field leader, Cyclops, who was characterized as a straitlaced Boy Scout with lines such as 'The rest of us have a job to do — and we're going to do it!' (Wein and Cockrum 26), and 'We're going down next, Thunderbird! Strap in!' (Wein and Cockrum 30) Bradford Wright observes that 'in 1984, Marvel featured Wolverine solo in a very popular four-part limited series, and in 1988 he won his own regular title.' (265) *Entertainment Weekly*, further, hailed him as 'Hollywood's most dominant franchise character, over others such as James Bond and Harry Potter' (Gordon et. al. xii) in 2006. More recently, Wolverine was feted by the editors of the popular entertainment website IGN as the world's fourth "best" comic-book hero in a May 2008 feature. Only Marvel's Spider-Man, DC's Batman, and DC's Superman ranked ahead of him. (IGN n.p.) The X-Men films prior to *First Class*, accordingly, were produced to capitalise upon this long-running popularity. However, the diminishing critical reception and box-office profitability that began with *Last Stand* indicated that Wolverine-helmed movies would no

longer be a sufficient anchor for the X-Men movie franchise. Additionally, the actor who played Wolverine in the X-Men films, Hugh Jackman, was not keen on committing to more X-Men films. A different direction for the franchise, accordingly, needed to be charted.<sup>10</sup>

A key strength of the X-Men franchise concept, though, is that entire multiple teams of characters are branded as such. This allows its producers to rotate different characters in and out of prominence — or introduce completely new ones — when necessary, yet count on their consumer-audiences to exhibit a degree of residual brand loyalty to these characters. Wolverine, in fact, was an original beneficiary of this negotiatory rotation. Not only was he part of *Giant*'s successful reworking of the X-Men team, but he was also initially planned to be a supporting character before his anti-authoritarian streak caught on with readers.<sup>11</sup> His waning popular reception later on in the films thus meant that producers could use this strength of the franchise to build upon the lessons learnt from its own past failure. It was Magneto, then, who despite being a supervillain, had been singled out as a compelling character by producers and the popular press, so much so that *X-Men Origins: Magneto* had once been planned for production.<sup>12</sup> Where the comic-book *Days and Ages* had already proven popular, a sample film review for *X-Men*, by way of example, now also found that 'Magneto's own passion is deeply personal, stemming all the way back to the Holocaust. ... Bryan Singer expertly develops our sympathies for Magneto while presenting clear problems

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<sup>10</sup> In a September 2011 interview, when Jackman was asked about starring in a putative *X-Men 4*, he said 'I don't see it. I can only see one movie [2013's *The Wolverine*] ahead. I'm pretty sure I'm well into the second half of this match. I don't know exactly where the end is, but I only go one at a time.' (in Moore n.p.)

<sup>11</sup> Other new X-Men introduced in *Giant* included the African weather-controlling witch Storm, and the demonic-looking German acrobat Nightcrawler. Additionally, the new series was meant to concentrate upon the new character Colossus. (Young and Mefford n.p.) As a seven-foot tall metal-skinned Russian from a collective farm, Colossus was very much Other both to the first class of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant X-Men, and to a real-world America dominated by Cold War-era headlines which warned America's citizens that 'Russia Now Calls Surprise Key Factor in Nuclear War.' (Schwartz 1)

<sup>12</sup> The fact that *X-Men: First Class* is called such, despite basically being the origin story of the X-Men and Magneto, is again proof that Donner and other producers want to distinguish future X-Men films from *Origins* as much as possible.

with his tactics.’ (Overstreet n.p.) The actor who previously portrayed the aged Magneto, Ian McKellen, similarly notes in an interview that Marvel considered a Magneto movie a ‘favourite because it has a social purpose and the strongest demographic are young blacks, Jews and gays who respond to the idea that society does treat some adults as mutants.’ (in Goodwin n.p.) In effect, if Wolverine’s anti-authoritarian tendencies were now too trite for audiences of the film franchise, its producers could now exaggerate and intensify the Otherness of the X-Men by focusing the narrative of a new film on their archenemy, whom previous media had already shown could be convincingly recuperated back into their fold.

### **A Byronic Hero**

As such, *First Class*’s iteration of Magneto essentially paints him as a contemporary reworking of the Romantic-era Byronic Hero, more specifically as this hero’s Noble Outlaw subset. While Peter Thorslev notes in his foundational work on *The Byronic Hero* that generically noble outlaws such as Robin Hood can be found in the hero-tales of any age, the Noble Outlaw Byronic Hero is distinguishably a sublimely attractive hero-figure:

He is figured as having been wronged either by intimate personal friends or by society in general, and his rebellion is thus always given a plausible motive. ...He is also invariably courteous towards women; one can forgive a Byronic Hero such as Conrad-Lara a multitude of sins when he risks his life to save a woman in distress. ... what particularly distinguishes the fully developed Romantic Noble Outlaw ...is his cloak of mystery and his air of the sublime. ...The hero is dogged eternally by secret sins (usually, however, more than half-forgiven by the indulgent reader, and he is filled with a high-souled or hidden remorse which flashes forth in occasional quick bursts of temper, or of kindness. Finally, the sublimity, the air of the fallen angel... (Thorslev 69-70)

This figuration of an alternately tender and terrifying character describes Magneto perfectly. While examples of his Byronic nature have already been briefly mentioned — dual victim of Nazi anti-Semitism and humanity’s ingratitude, yet a crusading avenger against injustice — in this chapter’s introduction, one particular scene in *First Class* deserves closer examination.

The first occurs early in the film, where Magneto, on a short break from his personal anti-Nazi crusade, enters an Argentinean bar for a drink. There, however, he encounters two German men who introduce themselves as a pig farmer and a tailor respectively. He also notices a framed photograph, of the Nazi doctor who previously tortured him during the war, hanging on the wall of the bar. Magneto's haunted, thousand-yard stare never falters. A brief conversation, with Magneto smiling, and *clinking* beer glasses with the men, follows:

Magneto: My parents were also from Dusseldorf.

Bar Patron: What was their name?

Magneto: They didn't have a name. It was taken away from them. By pig farmers and tailors.

The men, as well as the bartender, panic. They attack him. Magneto promptly uses his mutant superpowers to murder them. One is shot with his friend's gun. A swastika-hilted knife, which belongs to one of them, is used to stab the other two. It turns out that all these men, as both the knife and their panic attest to, are ex-Nazis who have fled post-war Germany. The climax of the scene involves Magneto pulling, off-camera, the knife out of the ex-Nazi's impaled palm, tossing it into the gut of the bartender, and then using his superpowers to call it back so as to impale the ex-Nazi's palm once more. All this is done in one continuous motion, except for a half-second pause where Magneto, after having stabbed the bartender, is frozen in stark relief against the light from outside the bar: all the better for audiences to appreciate and apprehend the tableau of violence with. The soundscape, further, intensifies this effect. Foreboding music, which takes its urgent cues from the action scenes in suspense-thrillers such as *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960), plays over the entire scene. A shot of Magneto holding the Nazi's knife at the table pans up to a closer one of the Nazi's agonized face. This shot is twined with a disturbing *squelch* when Magneto impales him off-camera. Magneto's control over metal aurally manifests with an unsettling, disembodied groan. The

violence might be always bloodless and sometimes implied, but by the time Magneto introduces himself as ‘Frankenstein’s monster ...looking for [his] creator’ (Vaughn 2011) at the end of the scene, remains impressive and highly disturbing. What started out as a convivial scene in an everyday locale has ended with dead men on the floor, and with their murderer calmly finishing his cold beer.

The reason I have described the bar scene in such detail is to show that it presents an extremely violent tone for a PG-13 superhero film. *Captain America*’s exploits against Nazis — indeed, a montage shows him blowing up tanks and punching out whole sections of soldiers — are by contrast presented as unambiguously exuberant heroics befitting those of war-era pulp magazines and comic-books. In the X-Men film franchise proper, *Origins*’s own bar fight scene featuring Wolverine is a dimly-lit brawl alternately filled with snarls, slow-motion falls, and quick-cut lunges and kicks. It comes across as a campy 1980s action movie. Yet, despite *First Class*’s comparative extreme of violence, Magneto is seen to be extremely tender towards women. He accepts the naturally blue-skinned, blue-scaled appearance of the shapeshifter Mystique; before they make love, he tells her that he wants ‘the real [her]’ (Vaughn 2011) as opposed to the pretty blonde disguise that she normally projects. His most cherished memory, further, is shown in soft focus as one from his childhood. His mother, killed when a young Magneto failed to perform well in a Nazi experiment, smiles down at him while he lights a candelabra. The adult Magneto weeps at this recollection, for he ‘didn’t know [he] still had that.’ (Vaughn 2011) Professor X’s authoritative response — for his psychic ability helped unlock this repressed scene for Magneto — serves to contextualise this scene for audiences. According to the Professor, inside Magneto there resides ‘not just pain and anger ...[that] there is good too.’ (Vaughn 2011) This intermingling of Magneto’s tenderness towards women with his traumatic past, his outsider status from normal society, and his necessary and sublime violence — for it was the Nazis who attacked him first — is in

essence what Thorslev talks about in his character formulation of the Noble Outlaw Byronic Hero.<sup>13</sup>

### Contemporary Superheroism

*First Class*'s Byronically-characterised Magneto is initially readable as a standard exercise in what John Cawelti terms as stereotype vitalization. According to Cawelti, this is a process where the producers of formula texts create a 'stereotypical character who also embodies qualities that seem contrary to the stereotypical traits ...[and/ or] the addition of touches of human complexity or frailty to a stereotypical figure.' (11-12) This process is seen as an effective and proven strategy for sustaining the interest of audiences, for audiences value a certain amount of uniqueness in such texts. (Cawelti 12) Any uncertainty in these audiences, which such a deviation from formula is deployed to engender, is seen as intensifying their pleasure when these texts eventually resolve according to pre-established conventions. Cawelti's specific examples are of Sherlock Holmes simultaneously being the supreme man of reason and an opium-addicted sot, and of old cowboy marksmen complaining of arthritis and sore feet. (11-12) However, we can — as the preceding section has shown — provisionally fit *First Class*'s Magneto into Cawelti's list. In the same way that Sherlock Holmes solves a mystery, and in the same way that the old cowboys uphold law and order on the frontier, the Byronic Magneto undergoes a faux-*Bildungsroman* in the tradition established by preceding superhero films, all the way down to announcing that we 'can call him Magneto' (Vaughn 2011) when *First Class* closes. The fact that he becomes a

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<sup>13</sup> While Magneto does choke a female secret agent with her metal chain later in the film, *First Class*'s narrative again encourages audiences to forgive this as a momentary fit of temper. Magneto, by this point in the film, has saved the mutants from missile bombardment by ungrateful humans, and he is choking the female agent in the belief that she has paralysed Professor X. Mystique, who is a sympathetic character, additionally joins Magneto's new-formed terrorist group immediately afterwards, further encouraging audiences to leave their sympathies with him.



supervillain instead of a supervillain is, according to this Caweltian perspective, an appealing twist on the superhero film formula.

Yet, such a perspective is so ahistorical and so broad-ranging that one encounters problems when applying it. Surely the classical cases of Sherlock Holmes, and of cowboys, are different from the case of a postmillennial superhero film. Cawelti's notion of stereotype vitalization is a useful first step, but a more specific explanation needs to be given to account for how and why the Magneto-centred *First Class* is functioning as a prequel and reboot of the X-Men film franchise. Scholarly literature on how the Byronic hero is functioning in the present day thus provides a vital subsequent step. Carrol Fry, for example, argues that these heroes are currently popular because they parallel 'the cultural shift away from the firm distinctions of good and evil throughout our culture' (276), not least since 'many of the values of postmodernism have influenced our popular culture: alienation, moral relativism, distrust of authority figures, and solipsism.' (277) Similarly, Atara Stein notes in *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television* that Byronic heroes — she counts Angel from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Q from *Star Trek* as such, and we can surely add Wolverine to her list — are 'so pervasive in contemporary popular texts ...[that] the examples seem endless.' (1) She argues that the core appeal of this hero 'is the same in Byron's times as it is in ours' (Stein 217) for these new formulations of heroes remain as iconoclastic as they are powerful. 'They do not have to bow to institutional pressure or to oppressive forces, for they have both the supernatural abilities and the attitude required to fight them. At the same time, they validate the audience's own doubts and fears and sorrows.' (Stein 217) Stein notes, though, in echo of Adorno and Horkheimer's concerns over 'the standardized jazz improvisation to the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eyes to demonstrate her originality ...the defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show' (154), that these contemporary Byronic heroes ultimately serve to stupefy their audiences. These new

heroes serve as a pressure valve for the rebellious and subversive impulses of their audiences, vicariously satisfying and defusing these impulses in the texts that they feature in. Whether ‘finishing the book or leaving the movie theatre, [audiences] must remain satisfied that authority has been successfully defied by the hero on the one hand, and that there is no need for them to defy authority on the other.’ (Stein 3) Magneto’s Byronic characterization in *First Class*, thus, is tentatively more readable as being in the mould of such a strategy.<sup>14</sup>

Jean-François Lyotard’s theory of the postmodern era as one which is dominated by little narratives — and a concordant ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (xxiv) — comes accordingly into consideration. While Lyotard does not strictly mean stories in the sense of once-upon-a-happily-ever-after tale — rather, he sees all of knowledge as an interlinked, cross-referenceable web, narratives as involving the premises upon which one believes something, and contemporary knowledge as self-referential narratives *ad infinitum* — he does note that ‘the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction’ (14) due to post-Enlightenment scientific progress. Further, ‘it does not look as though they will be replaced, at least not on their former scale.’ (14) These grand, overarching narratives, these metanarratives, once functioned as a means through which a culture masked its own inherent contradictions and instabilities, thus reifying the social order. But Lyotard’s postmodern condition is one where metanarratives are increasingly unappealing. Instead, atomized little narratives are increasingly favoured. These are ‘stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large scale universal or global concepts... [little narratives are] situational,

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<sup>14</sup> *First Class*’s rehabilitation of the villainous Magneto has precedent in other popular films. The millennial Star Wars prequels explain Darth Vader’s change from teenage heartthrob hero into the monstrous scourge of the galaxy. Earlier still, the American New Wave films of the late 1960s and early 1970s tended to feature their anti-hero protagonists in a complex, often sympathetic light. Stein’s comments about the ubiquity of the Byronic hero bear recall here. Where *Captain America* and *Origins* borrowed from war-era pulps and 1980s action movies, *First Class*’s appeal seem to hinge on its re-presentation of this enduring cultural preference and practice.

provisional, contingent, temporary and make no claim to universality, truth, reason or stability.’ (Klages 169)

Lyotard’s idea of little narratives, then, can in this light be extended to account for the popular appeal of the X-Men franchise: as discussed in this chapter’s preceding sections, the franchise is essentially one such little narrative. It works within a contemporary climate of increasing moral relativity, one where there is an accompanying intensification of popular scepticism toward tradition and authority. It presents to its audiences a constant and explicit re-evaluation and renunciation of societies which are variously ‘united in their fear of the unknown’ (Vaughn 2011), who see the X-Men as dangerously deviating from a wholesome norm best symbolized by establishment heroes such as the star-spangled Captain America, who takes the red, white, and blue of the American flag for his uniform. It shows that prejudice against those who differ from the norm can be unfounded, for it is the X-Men who, in their own fractious fashion, protect society from supervillains. A Lyotardian perspective thus links *First Class*’s Byronic Magneto with a specifically postmodern skepticism and ennui, much more in-depth than a blanket assertion of stereotype vitalization does.

At the same time, the X-Men franchise is a key hypertext not just within the superhero canon, but in the larger sphere of popular culture as well. In addition to Marvel’s own gamut of official tie-in products, Russell Dalton’s independently-published religious book *Marvellous Myths: Marvel Superheroes and Everyday Faith* (2011) devotes one entire chapter to examining the X-Men as such, for ‘like the ancient myths ... the stories of Marvel superheroes also offer readers and viewers some positive models of how extraordinary people face challenges and struggle to overcome adversity in order to live out heroic lives.’ (ix) Mikhail Lybansky’s popular science article on “The Racial Politics of X-Men” in *Psychology Today* implicitly gives the franchise great power to influence the mindsets of its audiences. (n.p.) His article reads as one which was written to counter any problematic messages that the

franchise espouses, for he finds that the franchise articulates ‘clear and unmistakable anti-racist themes, while at the same time (probably unintentionally) reinforcing harmful racial tropes.’ (Lybansky n.p.) Further, the X-Men film franchise was, as previous chapters of this thesis has found, critical in establishing the standards of the superhero film renaissance. Such a triple-tined institutional status complicates matters. Inextricably co-opted into these three spheres as a structuring metanarrative, the franchise’s articulation of vicariously subversive rebellion is thus likely to sound disingenuous.

Having Magneto as *First Class*’s Byronic hero, then, is readable as the franchise’s producers providing a faux-tactical little narrative which engages with, and then profitably repurposes, these features of the franchise. Consider the syntax of *First Class*’s official paratextual promotional press release:

*X-Men: First Class*, following the classic Marvel mythology, charts the epic beginning of the X-Men saga. Before Charles Xavier and Erik Lensherr took the names Professor X and Magneto, they were two young men discovering their powers for the first time. Before they were archenemies, they were closest of friends, working together, with other Mutants (some familiar, some new), to stop the greatest threat the world has ever known. (in Jamaludin n.p.)

*First Class*’s trailer works similarly to these press releases. It introduces Professor X first, and Magneto second. It opens on a shot of the grey wheelchair used by Professor X in the previous X-Men films. This fades out to the headline ‘Before he was Professor X’. (xmenmovies n.p.) This headline, in turn, fades out to a shot from *X-Men* (Singer 2000), where Patrick Stewart’s Professor X is using his telepathy-enhancing device Cerebro. ‘He was Charles’ (xmenmovies n.p.), the headline concludes, against a close-up of James McAvoy as a young Professor X. The same formula is repeated immediately. ‘Before he was Magneto ...he was Erik.’ (xmenmovies n.p.) Three shots — of Magneto’s grey, crested helmet from the film trilogy, of Ian McKellen’s Magneto facing down a squad of terrified

policemen, and of a haunted-looking Michael Fassbender as a young Magneto — follow. These paratextual materials cue the hyper-spectator to recall that Professor X and Magneto are heading towards an inexorable destiny as ‘archenemies.’ (in Jamaludin n.p.) Where Magneto is fated to be a supervillain who has run-ins with the forces of law and order, Professor X will thus become — as in the binary opposition schema which structures the majority of popular culture narratives — a hero-figure who protects everyday society from Magneto’s villainy. *First Class*’s poster and its credits further cement these relations. In them, James McAvoy gets top billing — as does Robert Downey Jr. in *Iron Man*, as does Chris Hemsworth in *Thor* — over Michael Fassbender. All these institutionally-provided thresholds to the *First Class* film text are essentially calculated to position Professor X as the film’s foremost character. With his single-lettered superhero codename — instead of his full name “Xavier” — invoked in these materials, Professor X is even metonymically linked to the film’s titular X-Men superhero team.

In a postmillennial mediascape where paratexts can be as important as the texts which they are ostensibly supposed to supplement, the fact that *First Class*’s promotional press release and trailers repeatedly and dissonantly place Magneto in the shadow of Professor X is readable as a strategy which reminds and encourages the film’s hyper-spectators to paratextually read Magneto as outsider Other to the X-Men franchise. This strategic positioning thus better allows these hyper-spectators to read him as contemporary Byronic hero — as opposed to establishment tool — within the film narrative proper, especially when the film, in the spirit of little narratives, give justifiable motivation for his future turn to supervillainy.

It is in this spirit of faux-rebellion, too, that that Magneto’s bar fight immediately cuts to a scene in which a drunken Professor X parties in an Oxford pub. Professor X is the toast of this pub, not least because he has just successfully defended his PhD. dissertation, and is

currently downing strongly alcoholic mixes in single gulps. He cheers, flirts with pretty girls, volunteers to help an American secret agent, and generally has a good night out. Prior to his iteration in *First Class*, though, the Professor X character was one generally portrayed as staid, near-sexless, and austere. The film franchise's version, for example, was played by Patrick Stewart, who delivered his lines in a stately, measured meter, and where his X-Men and X-Women engage in complicated interpersonal love triangles, his past relationship with a Scottish lady doctor is only hinted at in *Last Stand*. *First Class*'s two bar scenes, so tonally different, thus do not only encourage the hyper-spectator to read them — and by logical association, Magneto and Professor X as well — as uncanny reflections of each other, although such a direct reading is doubtlessly part of what the film's producers intended.

This is because *First Class*'s version of Professor X has less in common with his past characterizations than with the glad-handing and glamorous Iron Man of the postmillennial Marvel films. This Iron Man is a superhero who routinely seduces women, who basks in the limelight, and who always has a witty line for every occasion. To recall the words of *The Avengers*'s trailer, he is, even without his armoured suit, a 'genius billionaire playboy philanthropist.' (MARVEL n.p.) Further, this Iron Man is currently ubiquitous and popular. The character has recently featured in two heavily-promoted and highly successful titular blockbuster movies, and makes positive impressions in related movies such as *Thor* and *The Incredible Hulk*. (Leterrier 2008) His presence is meant to anchor the upcoming superhero crossover *The Avengers*. He has, in contrast to Magento's situation, the most screen time in *The Avengers*'s trailer, and is front and centre in its promotional material. Non-film related Marvel superhero media even use him as their poster-boy. The Japanese *Marvel Vs. Capcom 3* (Niitsuma 2011) videogame, for example, uses his image to represent the Marvel superheroes on the disc, despite the fact that sixteen other Marvel superheroes — which include Spider-Man and Wolverine — are in the game. As far as the phenomenon of the

postmillennial superhero is concerned, Iron Man presents as its most important figure. He essentially provides a metanarrative regarding quality and heroism within postmillennial superhero film texts. *First Class*'s Professor X — one recalls here also that *First Class* makes much of his family mansion in upstate New York, and that he bankrolls his X-Men — thus, taps on this popularity.<sup>15</sup> He is Iron Man in an Oxford suit.

The hyper-spectator, in addition to being meant to directly compare *First Class*'s Professor X against Magneto within the film's diegesis, is also meant to perform an extratextual reading of the former character which is not necessarily confined to the previous X-Men movies. *First Class*'s re-characterization of the Professor turns upon a multipart logic. On one hand, the differences between the young and hedonistic Professor and his ascetic aged incarnation can be motivated by *First Class*'s producers wanting to pique audience curiosity in seeing how he evolves into such. The re-characterization, further, gives the film a character-personality which has proven to be popular with the audiences of postmillennial superhero texts. More, it also allows for, with the provision of the ideological conflict between the composite Iron Man/ Professor X figure and the Byronic Magneto within *First Class*'s narrative, a compelling locus around which the hyper-spectator can sate any — or create new — suspicion or dissatisfaction with the structuring metanarrative which Iron Man provides for these texts. It does so by positively differentiating *First Class*, and its inevitable follow-ups, from other superhero films. Consider again the combined American and Soviet climatic, missile-laden ingratitude, and Magneto's own vindictive response to it. Not only has Magneto

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<sup>15</sup> While I have been unable to find any acknowledgement by *First Class*'s producers that their representation of the young Professor X is directly influenced by Iron Man, I should note that *First Class* borrows its representation of pre-transformation Beast from the influential *Spider-Man* movies. *First Class*'s Beast is not the heavyset acrobat of the original comics. Rather, with his awkward gangliness and bad haircut, he looks like Tobey Maguire, and even duplicates *Spider-Man*'s uniquely upside-down kiss with a love interest. Considering that *First Class* was meant to reinvigorate the waning X-Men franchise, taking characterization cues from popular superheroes from the present and additionally from the recent past seems to have been a deliberate strategy by *First Class*'s producers.

just exacted a fatal revenge upon *First Class*'s genocidal antagonist, but he has also — in the face of this monstrous ingratitude — just dramatically articulated his manifesto:

Magneto: Today our fighting stops! Take off your blinders, brothers and sisters. The real enemy is out there. I feel their guns moving in the water. Their metal, targeting us. Americans. Soviets. Humans. United in their fear of the unknown. The Neanderthal is running scared, my fellow mutants! Go ahead, [Professor X]. Tell me I'm wrong. (Vaughn n.p.)

Professor X has no effective response to this urgent, direct rhetoric. His efforts, in fact, only worsen the situation:

Professor X: ...You said [so] yourself — we're the better man. This is the time to prove it. There are thousands of men on those ships. Good, honest, innocent men! They're just following orders.

Magneto: I've been at the mercy of men just following orders. Never again. (Vaughn n.p.)

Even discounting the fact that Magneto is, in that scene, wearing a helmet that prevents his thoughts from being read, Professor X's appeal to the blamelessness of the Americans and Soviets is ill-advised. He has previously read Magneto's mind, and should know that his friend hates people who are 'just following orders.' (Vaughn n.p.) The line, too, is the very same used in the Argentinean bar scene as an ex Nazi's excuse for previous atrocities. That a close-up shot shows Magneto's facial expression changing, at Professor X's usage of the phrase, from one of consideration to one of utter determination is enough to cement this point. The ensuing physical scuffle between the two causes the Professor to be paralyzed, yet blame is shifted away from Magneto, for was simply using his powers to deflect bullets fired by an interfering secret agent. *First Class*'s Professor X, and accordingly the genius billionaire playboy philanthropist that he is modelled after, can in this key and fatal instance be thus read by the hyper-spectator — rather ironically — as ineffective fools against which the Byronic Magneto can be positively cast against.



In sum, the producer decision to have a Byronic Magneto anchor *First Class*, and subsequent X-Men films, cannot be fully accounted for by invoking the notion of stereotype vitalization. Rather, this notion has to be considered alongside the contemporary popularity of the Byronic hero. This is a little narrative not only speaks to the jadedness which characterises the citizen-subjects of the postmodern age — among whom number the hyper-spectator — and works within the conventions of the X-Men franchise, considering that this franchise's stock in trade is Byronic heroes. It can additionally be positively read against the more specific conventions of an X-Men film franchise which has established and exhausted the concept of the X-Men as outsider heroes, and against the conventions of a postmillennial superhero cycle dominated by Iron Man as well.

### **Forgetting and the Future**

Yet, Professor X was not originally paralysed by Magneto in the comic-books. This paralysis, in 1966's *Uncanny X-Men #20* (Thomas and Roth), instead came at the hands of the space alien Lucifer. Lucifer was the advance scout for his race's planned invasion of Earth. He dropped a stone block upon Professor X while the latter was foiling his plans. It was thus, 'pinned beneath the inexorable weight of the massive slab' (Thomas and Roth 18), that Professor X lost the use of his legs. Professor X, additionally, lists this incident as 'yet another reason why [he] founded the X-Men. For [he] knew that one day mankind would have to meet the renewed threat of Lucifer!' (Thomas and Roth 18) While copies of the original *#20* are long out of circulation, and while Lucifer was seldom seen again after the issue, the matter of Professor X's original paralysis is an easy thing to investigate in this age. Where there once was a structural amnesia associated with serial storytelling, Marvel has, for a start, reprinted *#20* as part of assorted collected editions over the years. More, these issues and editions no longer even need to be read. A simple Google search for "Professor X" or any other related terms leads one to not only a meticulously researched and cited Wikipedia page

which informs its readers about Lucifer's leg-crushing evil, but the official online Marvel wiki as well. This, too, mentions Lucifer's villainy. 'En route to the United States, Charles encountered the alien scout Lucifer in the Himalayas. To prevent any interference in his race's planned invasion of Earth, Lucifer dropped a massive stone block on Charles, crippling his legs.' ("Professor X" n.p.) Magneto does not figure at all in this entire misadventure.

*First Class*, though, is meant to make its viewers remember that Magneto had an important hand in Professor X's paralysis. The scene is not only placed at the end of *First Class*'s climax, but its moment-by-moment unfolding is purposefully deliberate. Before, where there were quick, noisy, and kinetic shots of missiles exploding in mid-air, and of the two men brawling, there is now a sustained slow-motion shot of Professor X falling to the ground clutching his back. Magneto's upraised arm, post-bullet deflection, further guides the viewer's attention to the Professor, as does the fact that there is now total silence. The last sound one hears, before this tableau features, is in fact a gunshot. With all these directorial touches, Professor X's final repeated lines — 'Actually I can't [move]. I can't feel my legs. I can't feel my legs!' (Vaughn n.p.) — hardly seems necessary.

Jim Collins, in his article "Batman: The Movie, Narrative: The Hyperconscious", mentions that in contemporary societies dominated by the presence of mass media, superhero texts have a hyperconsciousness about them. Resulting from the dual realization by both audiences and producers that these texts have a structuring history behind them, these texts self-consciously exhibit 'a hyperawareness on the part of the text itself of its cultural status, function, and history, as well as of the conditions of its circulation and reception.' (Collins 167) As such, any 'attempt to retell the story of Batman that recognizes full well that re-telling the story is impossible without reconfiguring the encrustations that have become as inseparable from the text as any generic configuration or plot function.' (Collins 167) Following Collins, Martyn Pedler opines that superhero texts now 'expand upon the past,

suddenly providing the tragic answers to questions that never needed asking before the new, ongoing continuity of memory required it ...[and that] hyperconsciousness forces the ‘spell of amnesia’ bestowed by seriality to wear off altogether. ‘ (12) For him, in an era where superhero texts are no longer the transient newsstand ephemera of decades past, ‘the new weight of collected memory makes it more and more difficult to simply ignore a ridiculous or inappropriate issue into oblivion.’ (Pedler 6) At the same time, though, Pedler recognizes that the narrative continuity surrounding the superhero remains paradoxical, ‘a tug-of-war between recall and forgetfulness; between scrapbooked moments fixed on the splash-pages of memory, and the necessary structural amnesia of serial storytelling.’ (9) These analyses can be profitably used as a starting point to account for *First Class*’s foregrounding of Professor X’s paralysis, and other points of departure from the X-Men franchise’s established canons.

This is because, while Collins and to a lesser extent Pedler rightly state the importance of hyperconscious texts and of the increased ease of remembering, they do not explicitly delve into the idea that forgetting is a key condition of memory. On one hand, memory formation is necessarily selective. That which is remembered is that which has not been forgotten.

Sigmund Freud, further, talks of repression as an often unconscious process through which this selection takes place, for ‘the presence of [an] incompatible wish ...[would give] rise to a high degree of mental pain; this pain [is] avoided by the repression.’ (n.p.) Freud’s attitude is supported by Frederic Nietzsche, who argues that man is made happy by forgetting:

...if forgetfulness were not present, there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hoping, no pride, no present. The man in whom this repression apparatus is harmed and not working properly we can compare to a dyspeptic (and not just compare) — he is “finished” with nothing. (Nietzsche n.p.)

Nietzsche, though, foregrounds the act of forgetting as an actively conscious one, ‘not merely *a vis inertiae* [a force of inertia], as superficial people think. It is much rather an

active capability to repress, something positive in the strongest sense.’ (n.p.) A psychological experiment conducted by Daniel Wegner, Frances Quillian, and Christopher Houston echoes Nietzsche's viewpoint. They found that a group which had been told to consciously suppress memories of a film had, five hours later, more difficulty recalling it than other groups which had not been told to do so. In particular, this group was ‘less able to retrieve the order of events by several measures ... even though their retrieval of the events themselves as assessed by recognition, free recall, and cued recall was not generally impaired.’ (Wegner et. al. 680) A coping mechanism against trauma accordingly results.

*First Class*, as hybrid prequel/ reboot to the X-Men film franchise, is meant to work as — as far as the reboot aspect is concerned — such an active choice. This is because Pedler additionally notes that the superhero’s origin story is meant to inform and explain his subsequent adventures, yet it itself ‘must also be an engine for future storylines, retold and reshaped for further novelty.’ (10) Finding out that Professor X was paralysed by a confusingly chimerical space-devil villain — who is, thanks to Lucifer’s subsequent irrelevancy to the franchise, primarily rendered in the garishly neon colours of 60s comic-books — is very likely to be an unpleasant one for the Google-using hyper-spectator. This is not least in the wake of the popular *First Class*, where the Professor’s paralysis is not only dramatically staged within its own privileged moment, but — since he is paralysed accidentally by his appropriately remorseful best friend — appealingly tragic within the film franchise’s overarching narrative. The scene, meant to make its audiences immediately know how Professor X was paralyzed, is also meant to afterward and inevitably make them actively decide to forget, or at least discount, the rather bathetic alternative which Lucifer presents.<sup>16</sup>

This, then, presents as another strategy of Johnsonian negotiation, one where the producers of

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<sup>16</sup> The scene, lingering as it does on slow-motion shots of a wounded Professor X clutching his back before he actually repeats that he cannot feel his legs, is even meant as an appealing play upon the hyper-spectator’s extant knowledge that the character ends up paralyzed.

the film franchise have banked on *First Class*'s dangerously Byronic Magneto in particular — and the film in general — to provide a new and emphatic point of rebooted origin against which future X-Men texts can be read against, and more importantly for the franchise, anticipated.

Such a strategy of rebooted, negotiated origins is made all the more powerful considering the additional findings of the psychological study. It — now taking Nietzsche's argument further — notes that existing case studies on the survivor-victims of a traumatic experience find that these subjects often break their memories of the entirety of these experiences up into assorted and 'sundry frames, each of which may become memorable by itself — but may also become associated with distracters used to suppress it and dissociated from the other frames that originally preceded and followed it.' (Wegner et. al. 680) The traumatic episode, thus, 'can no longer be replayed in one's mind when the continuity of the story is lost in this way, and so it is effectively forgotten.' (Wegner et. al. 680) It is pertinent here to note that Magneto's helmet and Professor X's wheelchair are, in *First Class*, both identical to the ones from the previous X-Men films. Wolverine, again played by Hugh Jackman as per these previous films, further appears in a cameo which explains why this formerly starring character is not in *First Class* more: he tells Professor X and Magneto to 'go fuck yourselves' (Vaughn n.p.) when they attempt to recruit him for their X-Men. These are details which help link *First Class* as prequel to the later films in general, and more specifically to the successful *X-Men* and *X2*.

Yet, other details do not match up with the later two, less well-received films. The mature Emma Frost is an important villainess in *First Class*'s Cuban Missile Crisis milieu, but there is a teenage Emma Frost in *Origins*'s historically later post-Vietnam War age. Neither is *First Class*'s youthfully paralyzed Professor X consistent with the ambulatory, late-middle-aged one who appears in one of *Last Stand*'s flashback scenes. At the same time, though, a Hugh

Jackman Wolverine atomized down to an amusing three-word cameo is a Wolverine shorn of his problematic *Origins* and *Last Stand*. His appealing anti-authoritarian personality is once again foregrounded, so much so that he is for that brief moment even beyond the pale of the Byronic Magneto. In the same way, having Professor X be paralyzed in *First Class* is a rhetorical device which exhorts the hyper-spectator to reconsider *Last Stand* and *Origins* as things that did not necessarily happen. While the misfortune of watching a bad film is much removed in impact from the trauma that psychological literature's survivor-victims have suffered, this is a change of mind which, as the psychological literature suggests, human beings are only too happy to make. This is not least when the frames through which *Origins* and *Last Stand* can be recalled — a young Emma Frost, a older Professor X walking — are made impossible throughout *First Class*'s run. The liminal status of *First Class* as reboot of/prequel to the X-Men film franchise, accordingly, is a doubled-pronged producer strategy. It encourages the hyper-spectator to recall the good parts of the franchise, yet simultaneously forget or discount the bad ones. Not only can popular anticipation for upcoming X-Men-branded films such as *The Wolverine* be created, but the existing X-Men film franchise can, in this manipulation of affect, be thus re-viewed according to the excellent quality that characterised the first two films, fostering further consumption of these texts.

## **Conclusion**

*First Class* presents an excellent case study for how the Marvel superhero film is functioning successfully within postmillennial Hollywood. It does so by being a text which was calculated to not only be a popular movie in and of itself, but additionally revive the fortunes of the flagging X-Men franchise. It has done so by learning from the larger X-Men franchise's track record of successes and failures, leveraging upon the X-Men team dynamic to shift its narrative focus to a new, Byronic hero when the previous one had exhausted his popularity with film audiences. This new hero, Magneto, by dint of having previously

prefigured as the franchise's main villain, profitably exaggerates and refreshes the franchise's key conceit of mutants as feared, yet noble, Others to normal society. His rivalry with a Professor X styled like Iron Man further allows him to be read by the hyper-spectator as an appealing Other within a overall postmillennial superhero film cycle which has a 'genius billionaire playboy philanthropist' (MARVEL n.p.) as a key structuring figure. The inconsistencies from previous iterations of the X-Men franchise that mark *First Class* — most notably Professor X's early paralysis and the mature Emma Frost — when read alongside the ways in which *First Class* is consistent with the earlier films in the franchise, are additionally important. They point to the franchise's producers encouraging the hyper-spectator to discount any previous problematic entries and instances that have occurred, and instead consider the franchise in the positive light of *First Class*'s — and thus the well-received first two films as well — events. *First Class*'s exacting renegotiation of the X-Men film franchise, in sum, presents valuable lessons for other flagging superhero film franchises — or, considering the failure-prone nature of the X-Men franchise, its own — to follow in future years.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined how popular comic-book superhero movies are functioning successfully in postmillennial Hollywood. I first drew a distinction between contemporary comic-book superhero films and those of the (recent) past, discussed the renewed importance of franchise-building in the convergence-focused multimedia era of postmillennial Hollywood, and introduced the theoretical figure of the hyper-spectator. Then, each of the main chapters of my thesis used case studies of these contemporary films. In Chapter 2, I problematized existing scholarly definitions of the superhero genre, and used *The Avengers's* marketing preview trailer to show how the hyper-spectator can be successfully marketed to. In Chapter 3, I found that the invariably textually-privileged assertions of superheroic identity — “I am Iron Man.” — in these superhero films are a producer strategy which asserts the primacy of the character as opposed to the actor that plays him. This, then, is a future-proofing strategy for when a new actor will be needed to play the character in later years. In Chapter 4, I considered *X-Men: First Class* in the larger context of the ailing X-Men film franchise, finding that its re-imagining of archvillain Magneto as lead Byronic hero was an appeal to the hyper-spectator's iconoclastic tendencies on multiple levels. I also found that the film was exhorting the hyper-spectator to disregard the failures of the previous two X-Men films, and instead reconsider the overall X-Men franchise in *First Class's* positive light.

In concluding this thesis, though, it is the new Marvel superhero cartoon series on basic American cable, *Ultimate Spider-Man* (Bendis and Dini 2012), that I wish to focus upon. The series aborted the previous highly-rated Spider-Man television cartoon series, *Spectacular Spider-Man* (Weisman and Cook 2008-09) on a season-ending cliffhanger, and was commissioned by Marvel to be the centrepiece of its new “Marvel Universe” programming block. *Ultimate*, like *Spectacular*, showcases many recognizable elements of the established Spider-Man multimedia mythos. In addition to the blue-and-red-suited Spider-Man, there is a



roughly contemporary New York setting in which the media unjustly paint Spider-Man as a menace to society. The power-hungry industrialist Norman Osborne plays a key role as Spider-Man's archenemy as well. Yet, unlike *Spectacular*, mixed in with these elements are also additions and embellishments that are lifted directly from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and also the new Spider-Man movie universe. As in the Cinematic Universe, there is a black Nick Fury in a major supporting role as a recruiter and manager of a superhero team — in *Ultimate*, the typically solo Spider-Man character is put into a diverse superhero strike team which echoes the one in *The Avengers* — and the organization which Fury leads is S.H.I.E.L.D, the Cinematic Universe's 'Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division' (Bendis and Dini n.p.), not the traditional Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division/ Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate of previous Marvel multimedia. A scene approximately five minutes into *Ultimate Spider-Man*'s very first episode, in which Iron Man, testing out his suit early in his superhero career, careens uncontrollably into the cars in his garage, is directly lifted from the 2008 movie, right down to the sustained long shot of the garage and ensuing slapstick mayhem, right down to a car alarm bathetically beeping as the scene finally cuts away to another. Further, Spider-Man himself breaks the fourth wall when his Aunt May — here a late-middle-aged career lady, not the frail, grandmotherly retiree of (among many others) the Sam Raimi movie trilogy — appears on-screen for the first time. He faces the camera, speaking directly into it:

I know what you are thinking. Spider-Man lives alone at home with his dotting old aunt. [He's a] loser! Think again. My aunt's pretty cool. She works all day, then Monday night she's in yoga. Tuesday, it's French cooking. Thursday, it's bowling. Her full schedule lets me come and go as I please. (Bendis and Dini n.p.)

This iteration of Aunt May, in sum, is one which draws upon the character's portrayal in *The Amazing Spider-Man*. (Webb 2012) That all these elements which originate from

blockbuster movies have been incorporated into the Spider-Man cartoon series recalls Derek Johnson's essay "Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?". In the essay, Johnson examines how the boundaries and the relational hierarchies between superhero comic-books and other superhero multimedia are 'overlapping and amorphous ...problematiz[ing] their textual coherences and continuities — both as a brand and as a basis for comic-book culture.' (66) Specifically, he considers the varied incarnations of the Wolverine character against Marvel's efforts, in the early 2000s, to blend them all into 'a single, uniform entity more like the Hugh Jackman Wolverine' (Johnson, "Wolverine" 80) of the popular first two X-Men movies, such that this 'generalized, all-purpose Wolverine ...[could] strengthen the character's potential as a brand.' (Johnson, "Wolverine" 80) Johnson finds that these efforts, however, had not yet been successful as of early 2003, 'even at the level of [Wolverine's physical] appearance... [due] to the sheer number of titles in which the character appeared.' ("Wolverine" 82) He ultimately notes that 'while further research needs to be done to determine the continued impact Marvel's emphasis on licensing will have on comic culture, it is unlikely that its fragmentary effects on characters like Wolverine will reinforce its cohesiveness.' (Johnson, "Wolverine" 85)

*Ultimate*'s similarities with both the Cinematic Universe and the new *Amazing* Universe — for the new Spider-Man movies are meant as a reboot of the Sam Raimi trilogy — accordingly provides an opportunity for such further research. Here, it is to be noted that comic-books were a comparatively tiny market when Johnson was writing. The top-selling comic during the May 2003 wide release of the *X2* global blockbuster movie, *Wolverine #1* (Rucka and Robertson), only sold 157, 000 US\$2.25 copies, and while other X-Men comics sold approximately 600, 000 copies in the same month, it is highly unlikely that these 600, 000 copies each went to a different consumer. Rather, a small group of fans buying multiple X-Men titles a month — the core X-Men titles sold about 96, 000 copies each — is much

more likely. (Comichron, “May 2003” n.p.) As of March 2012, the comics market, even after a series of successful superhero films and the astonishing anticipation for *The Avengers*, is not that much healthier. *Avengers Vs. X-Men #1* (Bendis and Romita 2012), which combines two of Marvel’s premiere superhero franchises, is the month’s bestselling comic, with 203, 000 copies sold. *Avengers Assemble!* (Bendis and Bagley 2012), meant as a tie-in to the movie, is the fifth-bestselling title for the month, but has only sold just over 100, 000 copies. (Comichron, “March 2012” n.p.) Comic-books, in effect, are at best only of middling importance to the superhero franchise: if a superhero falls in the forest with hardly anyone to hear, he does not really make a sound, not when more audiences will see him on the big screen noisily fighting aliens or Nazis or other superheroes.

Julia Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality, then, is also useful to recall here. Kristeva sees texts as being in dialogue with one another such that ‘a mosaic of quotations [results]; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.’ (37) These Kristevan notions of connections and change are taken up by Gerard Genette in his conception of hypertextuality, which is ‘any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.’ (“Palimpsests” 5) To return to Chapter 2’s phrasing about the features of the superhero metagenre, *Ultimate Spider-Man* can tentatively be read as an intertextual/ hypertextual grab-bag/ crazy quilt/ department store of tropes, associations, and plots which are also found in Marvel superhero films. Kristeva’s definition, though, does not explicitly account for the notion that not all texts are created equal, nor that these texts can all be necessarily received equally by audiences. Genette’s use of time in his definition is slightly problematic here too, considering that *Ultimate* premiered on 1 April 2012, and that *The Avengers* and *Amazing Spider-Man* were released to theatres later that year, in early May

and mid-July respectively. A synthesis, then, of Kristeva's and Genette's viewpoints is thus useful. In effect, successful popular superhero movies occupy a privileged space in postmillennial Hollywood. They are at the very top of the intertextual hierarchies that surround the superhero character's franchise. They are new hypotexts which are deployed by producers to subsequently chart and mould the popular expectations and interpretations of their superhero franchises.

*Ultimate*, then, with its inclusion of signifiers from both the Cinematic Universe and the new Spider-Man film universe, is thus usefully read in this new context. It serves as pre-release hype for both *The Avengers* and *Amazing*, and in a mediascape where consumers 'will go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want' (Jenkins 2), afterwards remain readable as a loose — for *Ultimate* takes place in its own separate narrative universe — supplementary reference to them, helping these films to stay fresh in the popular imagination until sequels to these films are inevitably released. Spider-Man's near-immediate breaking of the fourth wall with regards to *Ultimate*'s 'pretty cool' (Bendis and Dini n.p.) Aunt May, then, can be read as not only following the preternaturally wise child archetype found in teen-focused television programs such as *Boy Meets World* (Jacobs and Kelly 1993-2000) and *Lizzie McGuire*. (Minsky 2001-04) Rather — and here one notes that *Ultimate* is, like these titles, primarily targeted at children six to fourteen years old, yet cross-promotes with the National Basketball Association (NBA) such that commercials for the cartoon are played during major NBA games (Campbell n.p., Truitt n.p.) — *Ultimate* is also readable as an instrumentalized appeal to the media-literate hyper-spectator's general knowledge about the Spider-Man franchise, playfully asking him to reconsider it, to 'think again' (Bendis and Dini n.p.): *I know that Aunt May is normally a crone outside this show, and even Spider-Man knows that too!* Its repeated, textually-supported portrayal of a "pretty cool" Aunt May — Spider-Man's voice-over plays over images of her adroitly doing all the

things she mentions — can be combined with Spider-Man's willingness to acknowledge this was not always the norm, and the roughly similar new portrayals of Aunt May in *Ultimate* and *Amazing* help defragment any potentially dissonant multimedia multiplicities of the character into a cohesive whole.

More, this overt appeal masks comparatively more covert ones. Nothing is made of *Ultimate* Nick Fury's blackness in the cartoon's diegesis, nor too that a S.H.I.E.L.D agent who originates from the Cinematic Universe, Agent Coulson, is Spider-Man's high school principal in *Ultimate*. In effect, *Ultimate* presents the Cinematic Universe as the way things have always been, and its weekly broadcast ritual-format — and it will be broadcast globally as well — further reinforces this message over time, more than comic-books are currently able to. Johnson's quite justified concerns over the initial incomprehensibility and contradictoriness of the superhero franchise over its different platforms thus now seem mitigated with *Ultimate*'s example. And should the film rights for Spider-Man eventually revert back to Marvel, or if Fox and Marvel work out a deal allowing the Avengers and Spider-Man to cross over into each other's movie universes, *Ultimate Spider-Man* will, in an era where the hyper-spectator repeatedly demands that which has already been said or otherwise articulated, become a more potent bridge between, and advertisement for, this potential cross-over. The success of this putative postmillennial comic-book superhero movie, thus, can partly be attributed to other major Marvel texts synergistically providing a built-in market for it prior to release.

In conclusion, many postmillennial comic-book superhero movies exist, and more will be released in the coming years. The structure and format of a Masters thesis, however, has necessarily confined my examination of the comic-book superhero movie in postmillennial Hollywood to the *successful* ones, and the successful *Marvel* ones at that. More scholarship can be done, for example, on the unsuccessful postmillennial superhero movie. The big-

budget *Green Lantern* (Campbell 2011), which was released in the same summer as most of the movies this thesis has examined, promises to be a particularly compelling starting point. While *Green Lantern* featured a DC Comics superhero who has historically been a B-list, less-popular superhero like Iron Man used to be, and was even scripted to make its lead character resemble Iron Man in personality and powers — the trailer emphasises that Green Lantern is a daredevil playboy with high-tech toys that include a sleek, flight-capable suit — the film is the tenth-biggest worldwide box-office flop of all time according to TheNumbers.com, having lost US\$89 million on Warner Brothers's US\$222 million investment. (n.p.) How derivative, then, is *too* derivative? Similarly, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, as a title which retells and modifies the origin story of the recent *Spider-Man* — indeed, the tagline for the film is ‘The Untold Story’ (Webb n.p.) — presents a different question. How soon is *too* soon when it comes to franchise overhauls more extensive than *First Class*'s? This is of added pertinence when one considers that 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox is already planning to reboot the Fantastic Four and Daredevil franchises. Further, what effects will the production and ownership of Marvel and DC superhero films by megaconglomerates have on future superhero film production? Will knock-offs of these characters — such as Hong Kong's familiarly armoured and avenging *Future X-Cops* (Wong 2010) and similarly India's armoured and avenging G. One of *Ra. One* (Sinha 2011) — be the norm outside of Hollywood? Will a low-budget — or in fact, even a middling-budgeted — film about an “indie” superhero such as *Empowered*'s (Warren 2004) titular character be viable in American and/ or international marketplaces? Answering these questions would shed more light not only on how Hollywood functions with regards to global media flows, but also on how these films can (resoundingly fail to) play to the tastes, fears, and aspirations of different audiences and societies. Contextualising and deconstructing the complex phenomenon of the

superhero film further, thus, can serve as a lens through which this continuing age of convergence and conglomeration can be negotiated, resisted, and perhaps even appreciated.

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Super Agent Nick Fury hastily assembles a team of heroes to face the problem of egotistical Tony Stark (Iron Man), noble Steve Rogers (Captain America), volatile Bruce Banner (Incredible Hulk) and God of Thunder Thor along with superspy Black Widow and sharp-shooter Hawkeye. But the team's combustible personalities and their troubled histories collide, threatening the stability of their mission. The stage is set for a massive, destructive showdown in New York City, but will The Avengers be battling the evil Loki, or each other? Before Viewing. Troubled heroes In the late twentieth century, superheroes... Are heroes originally found in DC Comics more damaged than their Marvel counterparts? ©Walt Disney Motion Pictures.