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# Hollywood Superheroes

The Aesthetics of Comic Book to Film Adaptation

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television Studies

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## Declaration

This thesis contains no material derived from prior work, nor for another degree. It has not previously been submitted for examination at another institution. The thesis is the candidate's own work.

Parts of Chapter Two will be published in Barry Keith Grant and Scott Henderson (ed.), *Film, Comics and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, Forthcoming).

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## Abstract

This thesis develops a theoretically-informed approach with which to analyse the aesthetics of the adaptation of superhero comic books into blockbuster films. Pervasive modes of thinking present superhero blockbusters as artistically degraded products that are not worthy of aesthetic analysis. I demonstrate that exploring the ways in which superhero blockbusters adapt comic book style and form reveals aesthetic sophistication and multiplicities of meaning. Engaging with comic book and film history also enables me to identify ways in which superhero blockbusters have contributed to the development of Hollywood's blockbuster filmmaking paradigm. My approach combines models and concepts from studies of adaptation that employ poststructuralist theory. This theoretical framework explains transformations that content may undergo as it is adapted between the different forms available to comics and film, and enables examination of dialogues occurring in the vast networks of intertexts in which superhero blockbusters are situated.

After my review of literature establishes the thesis' theoretical underpinnings, my chapters undertake close textual analysis of three distinct case studies. The selection of case studies allows me to continue to develop my approach by examining different superhero archetypes, alongside significant contexts, trends and technologies that impact Hollywood blockbusters. Chapter one looks at the first superhero blockbuster, *Superman: The Movie* (1978). I begin by outlining, and exploring relations between, the range of *Superman* texts released prior to the film. Doing so reveals the qualities of the intertextual networks that comprise a superhero franchise. I then analyse the strategies that *Superman: The Movie* deploys to adapt and enter the network of *Superman* texts, before situating the film in the context of the emerging blockbuster paradigm in 1970s Hollywood.

Chapters two and three analyse films produced in the twenty-first century, as superhero blockbusters gained a central position in Hollywood production. Chapter two evaluates the aesthetics of the *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002, 2004 and 2007) in relation to two contexts that are often considered to have facilitated the superhero blockbuster's twenty-first century success: the increasing use and sophistication of digital filmmaking technologies in Hollywood, and the contemporary sociopolitical climate. Looking at the representation of bodies and space elucidates the ways in which the films incorporate digital filmmaking technologies into their adaptive practices and offer a sociopolitical commentary. Chapter three examines the strategies that films produced by Marvel Studios, with particular focus on team film *The Avengers* (2012), deploy to adapt the model of seriality that superhero comic books use to interconnect multiple series in a shared diegesis. The analysis focuses on ways in which *The Avengers* uses bodies and space to compress the expansive diegetic universe into a single film, and interrogates how these strategies shape the film's sociopolitical meanings. My case studies demonstrate that the approach developed in this thesis illuminates the complex and equivocal meanings that the adaptive practices of superhero blockbusters generate.

## Introduction

A handful of soil sits on top of Clark Kent/Superman's (Henry Cavill) coffin and, for a moment before the credits roll, a few grains begin to float. This final image in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016) informs the audience of what they are assumed to already know: Superman does not die. Audience members may know of Superman's various deaths and resurrections in comic books.<sup>1</sup> At an extra-textual level, the character has been repeatedly reborn. Scores of *Superman* narratives in media from comics and radio to television and cinema have started, ended and replaced one another throughout the character's seventy-eight-year history.<sup>2</sup> *Batman v Superman's* subtitle, *Dawn of Justice*, signifies that it offers not an end, but rather a new beginning, building a narrative about the formation of superhero team the Justice League, of which Superman is usually a key member. The promise of rebirth and continuation in the film's final image thus also gestures toward a broader phenomenon that twenty-first century cinema audiences are encouraged to accept: the superhero blockbuster does not die. Simultaneously recalling Superman's past while staking his and the superhero genre's future, this image suggests some of the ways in which superhero blockbusters' stylistic strategies can contribute to the adaptation of icons of popular culture.

This thesis will undertake an aesthetic analysis of Hollywood blockbuster adaptations of superhero comic books. While I will examine tropes and thematic concerns that recur and develop throughout different examples of the superhero blockbuster, and the ways in which these are adapted from texts in other media, this project is not a study of the superhero genre itself. The intention of this project is instead to formulate an analytical framework with which to appreciate the aesthetics of the superhero

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<sup>1</sup> Superman's most famous comic book death occurs in Dan Jurgens (w & p), Brett Breeding (i) and Glenn Whitmore (c). 'Doomsday!', *Superman Volume 2 #75* (January 1993) (repr. in Bob Kahan, *The Death of Superman* (New York: DC Comics, 1993), unpaginated). My citation system for comics is based on the one outlined by Allan Ellis, 'Comic Art in Scholarly Writing: A Citation Guide', *Comic Art and Comics*, (2002), < <http://www.comicsresearch.org/CAC/cite.html>>, accessed on 21 August 2015. For more details on my system see the 'Comics and Novels Cited' section at the end of this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Following the dominant usage in the literature on adaptation, in this thesis I will use 'media', rather than 'mediums', as the plural of medium.

blockbuster's adaptive practices. This analytical framework will be developed through close analysis of key superhero blockbusters.

Despite this thesis not being a study of genre, it is necessary to outline why I am classifying these films as examples of the superhero genre. Certain other scholars have situated superhero blockbusters in wider genre parameters. For example, Liam Burke discusses superhero blockbusters as part of what he calls the 'comic book movie' genre, while Martin Flanagan, Mike McKenny and Andy Livingstone situate the films within the broad parameters of the action/adventure genre.<sup>3</sup> In both cases compelling arguments are made for why superhero blockbusters are presented and received as examples of these wider genres, but it is important to acknowledge that the films also situate themselves in the well-established traditions of superhero texts. Recognising the superhero genre's traditions enables us to account for the expectation that Superman will be resurrected in a film that follows *Batman v Superman*. Conversely, viewers of *Ghost World* (Terry Zwigoff, 2001), another film that Burke discusses under the rubric of the comic book movie, are not assumed to expect protagonist Enid (Thora Birch) to return in a sequel after she boards a bus to a mysterious location in the film's closing moments. This gesture of alienation from, and dissatisfaction with, contemporary society coheres with narrative traditions of U.S. independent cinema.<sup>4</sup> The superhero genre therefore exhibits specific traits that may be obscured when superhero blockbusters are placed within broader, more generalised generic parameters.

Discussing superhero blockbusters as examples of the superhero genre enables me to offer a focused exploration of ways in which the films adapt a well-documented and widely acknowledged generic

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<sup>3</sup> Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015). Burke conceptualises the comic book movie genre in his chapter titled 'The Comic Book Movie Genre', pp. 84-128; Martin Flanagan, Mike McKenny and Andy Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 84-87.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Jeffrey Sconce situates film in a category of U.S. independent cinema that he calls the "smart' film'. He identifies in this category the recurring theme, which is encapsulated in the closing moments of *Ghost World*, of 'interpersonal alienation within the white middle class (usually focused on the family) and alienation within contemporary consumer culture'. Jeffrey Sconce, 'Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film', *Screen*, 34:4 (2002), p. 364.



tradition. In my review of literature, I will discuss some critical examinations of the superhero genre, but it is worth here gesturing to studies such as Peter Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* and Saige Walton's 'Baroque Mutants in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?: Rethinking Genre Through the Superhero', which examine the history and defining qualities of the superhero genre.<sup>5</sup> It is widely agreed that the superhero genre started in 1938 with the debut of *Superman*<sup>6</sup> in *Action Comics* #1, a comic book that will be discussed in more detail in my first chapter.<sup>7</sup> The genre proliferated in comics rapidly in its first decade, and continues to be the dominant genre in the medium, to the extent that the two are often seen as synonymous. As Scott McCloud explains, '[s]ome think that the superhero genre and comics were made for each other, that it's just a case of "comics doing what comics does best [sic]"'.<sup>8</sup> In fact, since the release of *Action Comics* #1, there has only been one period in which the superhero genre was not the dominant genre in comic books. Post-World War II, from around the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, crime and horror comic books dominated the market. This trend sparked a public outcry, fueled most notoriously by the 1954 publication of Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, a scathing denouncement of comic books, arguing that they were causing juvenile delinquency.<sup>9</sup> The outcry saw comic books burned on mass street-bonfires, comic book publishers indicted at Senate hearings, and was ultimately quelled by the introduction to the comic book industry of self-imposed

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006); Saige Walton, 'Baroque Mutants in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?: Rethinking Genre Through the Superhero', in Angela Ndalians (ed.), *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 86-106.

<sup>6</sup> Comic book characters, particularly superheroes, often share their names with the comics in which they appear, and these names are also used to refer to their franchise (if applicable). In this thesis, references to a character by name will appear in unformatted text, while references to texts or franchises that share a character's name will be italicised. When I quote from literature that uses different formatting I will retain the author's formatting.

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!', *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938) (repr. in Rowena Yow (ed.), *Superman: The Golden Age Omnibus Volume 1* (New York: DC Comics, 2013), pp. 14-26).

<sup>8</sup> Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionising an Art Form* (New York: Perennial, 2000), p. 118. This publication is a comic. Formatting of writing in comics is typically much more varied and expressive than in books. For example, in the cited quotation, 'superhero genre', 'comics', 'made for each other' and "'comics doing what comics does best'" are italicised and bold. The iconic functions of words in comics are discussed in my review of literature. Since I cannot fully recreate the expressive iconicity of words in comics, which are typically handwritten and can vary in style and size, in this thesis, all quotations from comics will remove the more elaborate elements of formatting.

<sup>9</sup> Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (London: Museum Press Limited, 1955).

censorship in the form of the 'Comics Code'.<sup>10</sup> The restrictions imposed by the Comics Code led to the cancellation of many crime and horror titles and put some of the biggest crime comic book publishers, most notably EC, out of business, paving the way for a rejuvenation of the superhero genre in the late 1950s and 1960s.

This thesis is not a historical account of the superhero genre, but key developments, such as Marvel Comics' role in rejuvenating the genre in the 1960s (discussed in chapter two), will be examined. Observing ways in which the genre has been modified and expanded throughout the years is vital to appreciating its stylistic and formal strategies since, as McCloud explains, '[a]fter 60 years of mutations, the superhero genre currently incorporates hundreds of embedded stylistic "rules" governing story structure, page composition and drawing style'.<sup>11</sup> However, as will also become apparent, particularly when I trace the development of *Superman* in chapter one, the superhero genre's conventions and traditions developed not just in comics, but through dialogues between a range of media. This thesis focuses on two key media from this dialogue: comic books and blockbuster films. I have already noted that comics enjoy a privileged status within the genre to the point of the two being seen as synonymous. The starting point for my analysis is looking at the ways in which superhero blockbusters adapt the aesthetic practices of comics books. I develop this enquiry by examining how significant trends and technologies of Hollywood's blockbuster filmmaking paradigm have impacted, and been impacted by, the superhero genre. To gain a full appreciation of the complexities of this adaptive process, it will be necessary to also observe how other media and formats have influenced the development of superheroes that I analyse, such as television series and superhero films that are not blockbusters. Before the first superhero blockbuster was released, many superheroes had featured in film serials, including *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (John English and William Witney, 1941), *Batman*

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<sup>10</sup> For discussions of this period of comic book history and these events, see Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 56-179; David Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America* (New York: Picador, 2008); and Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: History of the Comics Code* (Mississippi: University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, p. 114.

(Lambert Hillyer, 1943) and *Captain America* (Elmer Clifton and John English, 1944), while the most prominent superhero feature film was *Batman: The Movie* (Leslie H. Martinson, 1966), based on the television series *Batman* (ABC, 1966-1968). I explore interrelations between films such as these and the blockbusters that comprise my corpus where appropriate.

My approach is to examine stylistic and formal interactions between texts and media through close textual analysis. By providing an aesthetic appreciation of superhero blockbusters as adaptations, I am offering an original contribution to the scholarship on superhero blockbusters.<sup>12</sup> The majority of literature on these films has an industrial or an ideological focus. Key examples include Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone's *The Marvel Studio's Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe*, which frames its discussion of films produced by Marvel Studios with industrial analysis, and Dan Hassler-Forest's *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberalist Age*, which provides a purely ideological analysis of superhero blockbusters.<sup>13</sup> Burke's *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* offers the most extensive published exploration of the aesthetics of the comic book movie. This exploration comprises the last two chapters of a book that seeks to cover all areas of the cinematic phenomenon, also examining, for example, industry, genre and fandom.<sup>14</sup> While Burke outlines many significant stylistic tendencies of comic book movies, subsuming this exploration into an all-encompassing study precludes the kind of close readings of particular texts that I will undertake in this thesis. My analysis will demonstrate that, especially considering the vast networks of texts that each superhero

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<sup>12</sup> While I apply my approach to analysis of significant trends and technologies that have impacted superhero blockbusters, due to space constraints it is not possible to analyse every development. One important technological trend that this thesis does not analyse is the twenty-first century re-emergence of 3D film presentation. Many twenty-first century superhero blockbusters are available in 3D versions, and close analysis of stereoscopic presentation in these films would contribute to an appreciation of their aesthetics. However, I have opted to prioritise the analysis of factors that are frequently discussed as central to the success of superhero blockbusters, such as computer-generated imagery and media franchising, but have not been satisfyingly incorporated into an aesthetic analysis of superhero blockbusters' adaptive practices. My chosen areas of analysis demonstrate that my approach reveals the previously unappreciated aesthetic significance of these factors.

<sup>13</sup> Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studio's Phenomenon*; Dan Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* (Zero Books: Washington, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*. These two chapters are titled 'A Comic Aesthetic' and 'How to Adapt Comics the Marvel Way', and can be found on pp. 169-262.

blockbuster adapts, it is necessary to examine an array of intertextual interactions, and outline how these interactions manifest in individual texts, to gain a nuanced appreciation of the aesthetics of superhero blockbusters.

My review of literature begins by surveying key areas of scholarship within the fields of comics studies and comics to film adaptation. This survey will identify pervasive discourses that have prevented aesthetic appreciation of the superhero genre, namely the perception of superhero texts as genre products rather than works of individual auteurs, and the tendency to apply ideological analysis to superhero texts. The discussion of ideological analysis will demonstrate that more contributions to this scholarship on superhero texts are unnecessary at a time when it already vastly outweighs aesthetic analysis. Furthermore, the focus on ideology has been at the expense of an appreciation of aesthetics. Ideological analysis suggests that superhero texts are at best a reflection of sociopolitical discourse. The analysis in this thesis will demonstrate that focusing on aesthetics facilitates sophisticated readings of complexities and potential incoherences that superhero texts contain.

The second half of my review of literature will construct my approach through combining models and concepts provided by different scholars who theorise adaptation. I am not formulating a theoretical paradigm, but rather developing a pliable theoretical approach with which to appreciate the aesthetics of superhero blockbusters. The approach that I formulate will be equipped to examine dialogue between forms, particularly different kinds of words and images, that occurs in exchanges between the network of texts that comprise a superhero franchise. Exploring the adaptation of characters and themes between these different forms also enables me to interrogate relations between form and content, and illuminate ways in which meanings may shift in the process of adaptation. My methodology is therefore to combine a poststructuralist theoretical position with close textual analysis. Throughout my chapters, my approach will continue to develop through being combined with film theory, and taking comic book and film history into account.

The superhero blockbusters that I will develop my approach through analysing are *Superman: The Movie* (Richard Donner, 1978), the *Spider-Man* trilogy (all Sam Raimi, 2002, 2004 and 2007) and *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012). *Superman: The Movie* is significant for its status as the first superhero blockbuster, and for adapting the superhero who started the genre. Analysis of *Superman: The Movie* will illuminate the adaptive strategies and stylistic tropes that this text established for the superhero blockbuster. Moving from *Superman: The Movie* to the *Spider-Man* trilogy shifts my focus to the beginning of the most prolific period for superhero blockbusters, what I call the ‘twenty-first century superhero blockbuster boom’, and allows me to develop my approach by considering key contexts that are widely considered to have facilitated this boom. The superhero blockbusters that were released in the years 1978-2002 were primarily *Superman* sequels and *Batman* films.<sup>15</sup> While it is not my intention to undervalue the impact that *Batman* has had, and continues to have, on the superhero genre, I have elected not to use a *Batman* film as a case study since, out of all the superheroes, Batman has been subject to the most extensive academic analysis.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, like *Superman*, *Batman* is owned by publisher DC Comics, meaning that DC superheroes have already dominated academic writing on superheroes. Choosing *Spider-Man* as my second case study enables me to examine an exemplar of the distinct superhero archetype associated with publisher Marvel Comics. The focus on Marvel is continued in my third case study, as Marvel Studios have undertaken the most successful attempt to adapt the kind of multi-series seriality found in superhero comic books into film. *The Avengers* showcases Marvel Studios’ model of serialisation by bringing characters from various films together in

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<sup>15</sup> These were *Superman II* (Richard Lester and Richard Donner (uncredited), 1980), *Superman III* (Richard Lester, 1983), *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Dir. Sidney J. Furie, 1987), *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992), *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995) and *Batman & Robin* (Joel Schumacher, 1997). The other most prolific superhero blockbuster to be released in this period, at the beginning of the twenty-first century superhero blockbuster boom, was *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000). An important reason for me choosing to look at *Spider-Man* rather than *X-Men* is that I wish to save analysis of the dynamics of the superhero team for my discussion of *The Avengers*.

<sup>16</sup> Key works in the body of Batman scholarship include Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio’s pioneering edited collection *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991); and Will Brooker’s two monographs, *Batman Unmasked: Analysing a Cultural Icon* (London: Continuum, 2000) and *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* (London: IB Tauris, 2012).

a superhero team.<sup>17</sup> My chosen case studies therefore enable me to build my approach by applying it to a range of significant superhero archetypes, narrative formations and developments in superhero blockbuster filmmaking. The films I am analysing are either adapted from DC or Marvel characters, since characters owned by these publishers feature in the vast majority of superhero texts, and because films adapted from these characters have been pivotal to developments in the superhero blockbuster.<sup>18</sup>

My analysis of *Superman: The Movie* in the first chapter explores the unique adaptive challenges posed to superhero blockbusters. I begin by mapping Superman's development across texts in various media produced in the forty years preceding *Superman: The Movie's* release, to establish the extent to which adaptation between forms and intertextual dialogue are inherent to superhero texts. Identifying the traits and parameters that these texts present for *Superman* also enables me to illustrate the kind of "source" that a superhero blockbuster is tasked with adapting. I then explore the ways in which the film's stylistic strategies adapt, and situate the film in relation to, this array of pre-existing *Superman* texts, while also situating the character and superhero genre in the context of 1970s Hollywood. This first chapter therefore examines ways in which *Superman: The Movie's* adaptive strategies shape diegetic meanings while extra-textually forging a place for the superhero blockbuster alongside other superhero texts and within Hollywood.

After identifying the adaptive strategies, alongside specific tropes, that *Superman: The Movie* deploys, my subsequent chapters explore whether these are continued, developed and/or modified by superhero blockbusters featuring different characters and produced in changing filmmaking contexts.

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<sup>17</sup> Although *The Avengers* is available in 3D versions, I analyse the 2D version. Doing so enables me to focus my discussion on the aesthetic significance of the film's franchising strategies, which are typically discussed as Marvel Studios' most important contribution to both the superhero blockbuster and the Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking paradigm.

<sup>18</sup> There have been high-profile Hollywood films adapted from other publisher's characters. Examples include *Hellboy* (Guillermo del Toro, 2004), based on characters published by Dark Horse Comics, and *Mystery Men* (Kinka Usher, 1999), based on characters who have been published by various independent publishers, including Aardvark-Vanaheim and Renegade Press. While these films exhibit many qualities associated with blockbusters, they lack other qualities. For example, both are mid-, rather than big-, budget productions. My first chapter includes a discussion of the qualities generally attributed to blockbusters.

My second chapter begins by looking at ways in which the *Spider-Man* trilogy incorporates digital filmmaking technologies, which at the time were gaining increasing prominence in the production of Hollywood blockbusters, into its adaptive practices. I explore ways in which computer-generated imagery (CGI) in live-action film reconfigures debates on the formal relations between comics and film, and reveals the challenges and opportunities these technologies present to superhero blockbusters. Besides the development of CGI, the contemporary sociopolitical climate is commonly considered a key factor that facilitated the twenty-first century superhero blockbuster boom. The majority of the analysis undertaken in both chapters by this point will have elucidated the superhero blockbuster's aesthetics of adaptation. The second half of my *Spider-Man* chapter looks at the sociopolitical aspects of the superhero blockbuster aesthetics, with a view to demonstrating the complex and ambiguous meanings that the films' stylistic strategies can produce.

The third chapter continues to explore ways in which superhero blockbusters' adaptive strategies contribute to the generation of meaning. I first look into how adaptive strategies are modified to adapt the model of multi-series seriality found in superhero comic books into cinema. To undertake this analysis, it is necessary for me to examine the interrelations between various films in different series that are situated within the shared diegesis that Marvel Studios have dubbed the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Since team narratives are a key strategy through which comic book universes are managed and interconnected, I undertake my analysis of key aspects of the MCU alongside analysis of its first team film, *The Avengers*. By looking at manifestations of the strategies of comic book seriality and team narratives in the aesthetics of these films, I will illuminate ways in which these adaptive practices are implicated in the creation of intertextual and sociopolitical meanings.

Before I begin, a few notes on terminology are required. When formulating a dictionary-style definition for the medium, McCloud defines 'comics' as a noun that is 'plural in form, used with a singular verb'.<sup>19</sup> 'Comics' is thus used as a singular noun to describe the medium. This is the accepted way to refer to

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<sup>19</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 9.

the medium in scholarship, the study of the medium itself being termed 'comics studies'.<sup>20</sup> I will therefore use the plural form when referring to the medium throughout this thesis. Following McCloud's identification of 'comics' as the medium itself, the various kinds of comics – the most popular being comic books, comic strips and graphic novels – can be considered formats.<sup>21</sup> Burke employs this designation, and lists some of the qualities that typically distinguish different formats as 'length, layout, mode of presentation, and readership'.<sup>22</sup> General summaries of the three may read as follows: comic books are serialised periodicals of typically 20-40 pages with a traditionally young but increasingly specialist audience; comic strips are short comics told in one or a few strips (horizontal rows of panels) and are syndicated, traditionally in newspapers and magazines; graphic novels are longer, self-contained comics that are published as hardback or softback books and often intended for an adult audience. The format that will receive most discussion in this thesis is the comic book since, although superheroes also feature in graphic novels and comic strips, they are most commonly found in comic books. Furthermore, as will become apparent in my analysis, Hollywood blockbuster adaptations of superhero comics often explicitly gesture to comic books, and adapt strategies and narrative models associated with the format.

Comic books and blockbuster films are often perceived as some of the most artistically degraded products of popular culture. By developing a theoretical framework through which to appreciate the superhero blockbuster's aesthetics of adaptation, and engaging with comics and film history, this thesis seeks to rescue superhero blockbusters from modes of thought that dismiss them as commercial products that are unworthy of serious aesthetic analysis. The approach that I develop in the following pages will illuminate stylistic sophistication and multiplicities of meaning for which superhero blockbusters are often not given credit. By appreciating these complexities, we can reappraise the

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<sup>20</sup> For an example of this usage and discussion of the field see Bart Beaty (ed.), 'In Focus: Comics Studies: Fifty Years After Film Studies', *Cinema Journal*, 50:3 (2011), pp. 106-134.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that this designation is not universally agreed on. For example, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith discuss comic books and comic strips as separate media. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 1-7.

<sup>22</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, p. 7. Burke lists these as qualities that distinguish comic books from strips, but they are more widely applicable when distinguishing between other comics formats.



significance of the superheroes who are currently perceived to dominate twenty-first century Hollywood.

## Review of Literature

This literature review comprises two main sections. Firstly, I survey pertinent critical approaches to comics, looking at formalist analysis, auteurism, genre critique and ideological critique. I outline which of these approaches are most commonly applied to superhero texts, and the kinds of reading that they elicit. I primarily focus on discussions of superhero comic books, but toward the end of the section also note some of the ways in which superhero films are included in these discussions. The second section examines the approaches to adaptation that inform my thesis. I interrogate issues of medium specificity, surveying the ways in which such issues have been debated in discussions of comics' and film's formal properties, before exploring poststructuralist theories of adaptation. Through identifying and combining useful theoretical models, this second section generates the key concepts that inform my approach across the thesis.

## Critical Approaches to Comics and Superheroes

### ***Formalist Approaches***

Scott McCloud's influential *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is the most useful formalist examination of comics for my project due to its inclusivity and thoroughness.<sup>23</sup> The publication itself is a comic, enabling direct illustration of the medium's form. McCloud expands on the formalist approach pioneered by Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art*, first published in 1985.<sup>24</sup> While *Comics and Sequential Art* provides instruction on methods that can be used in analysing, and more specifically creating, all forms of comics, Eisner provides examples drawn exclusively from his own comics, predominantly his celebrated *Spirit* stories. Updated versions of *Comics and Sequential Art* provide further examples from independent or 'alternative' comics by creators such as Robert Crumb and Alison Bechdel, effectively providing the basis for a canon of formally sophisticated comics. In contrast, McCloud provides a critical framework for analysing the key formal elements of which *any* comic is comprised. McCloud illustrates the medium's breadth by applying his analysis to diverse genres and

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<sup>23</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994)

<sup>24</sup> Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*, rev. edn (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

formats of comics, from newspaper “funnies” to autobiographical graphic novels. As outlined by Henry Jenkins, McCloud’s central areas of exploration are ‘the work of the gutter, the construction of time and space, the deployment of expressive lines and color, principles of juxtaposition, and the range between realistic and iconographic modes of representation’.<sup>25</sup> I will now discuss each of these in turn.

The gutter is the space between two panels, often a blank white area. McCloud discusses the role it plays in ‘closure’, which he describes as the ‘phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole’.<sup>26</sup> McCloud asserts that ‘in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea’.<sup>27</sup> Through closure, comics readers bridge the gaps between panels in their imagination, mentally transforming a series of still images into a complete, continuous world. Readers of superhero comics are often expected to use their knowledge of the narrative world’s unique fantastic qualities to complete events that would not be familiar from real life. For example, in *The Uncanny X-Men* #142 shapeshifting mutant Mystique transforms from a security guard to her natural form in the gutter between two panels [Figure 1].<sup>28</sup> Mystique’s dialogue continuing from one panel to the next and her retaining of the security guard’s arm in the second panel function as cues prompting readers to morph one figure into the next in the space by which the panels are separated. Thus the spatial transition is also a temporal transition, covering the time in which it takes Mystique to morph.

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Jenkins, ‘Introduction: Should We Discipline the Reading of Comics?’ in Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (ed.). *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (p), Terry Austin (i), et al. ‘Mind out of Time’, *The Uncanny X-Men* 142 (February 1981) (repr. in Will Lucas (ed.), *The Uncanny X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Tunbridge Wells: Panini Publishing, 2006), pp. 92-114).

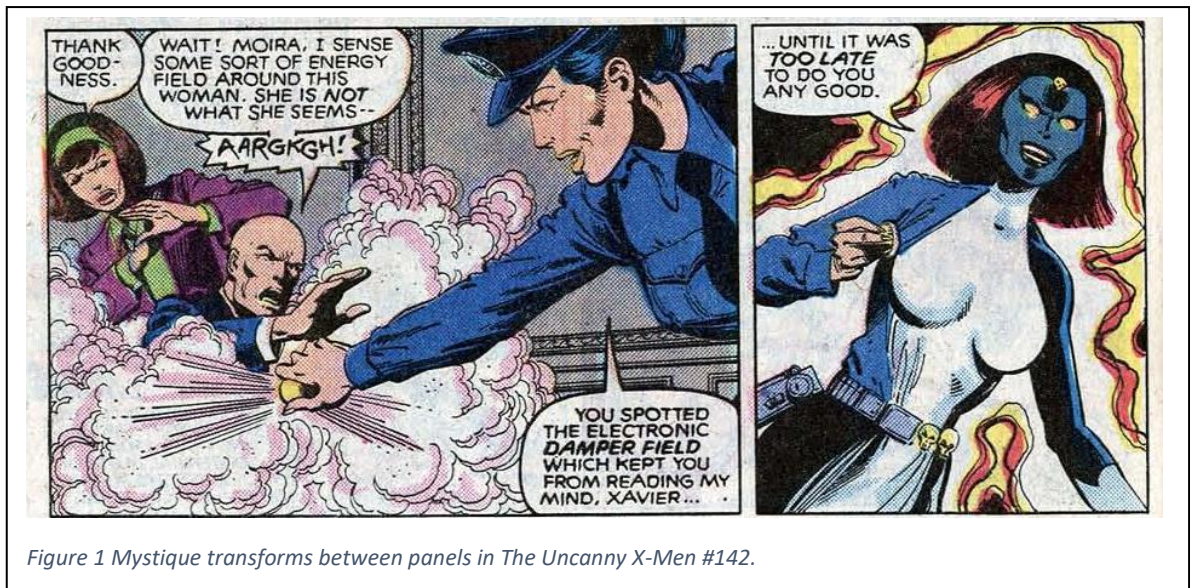


Figure 1 Mystique transforms between panels in *The Uncanny X-Men* #142.

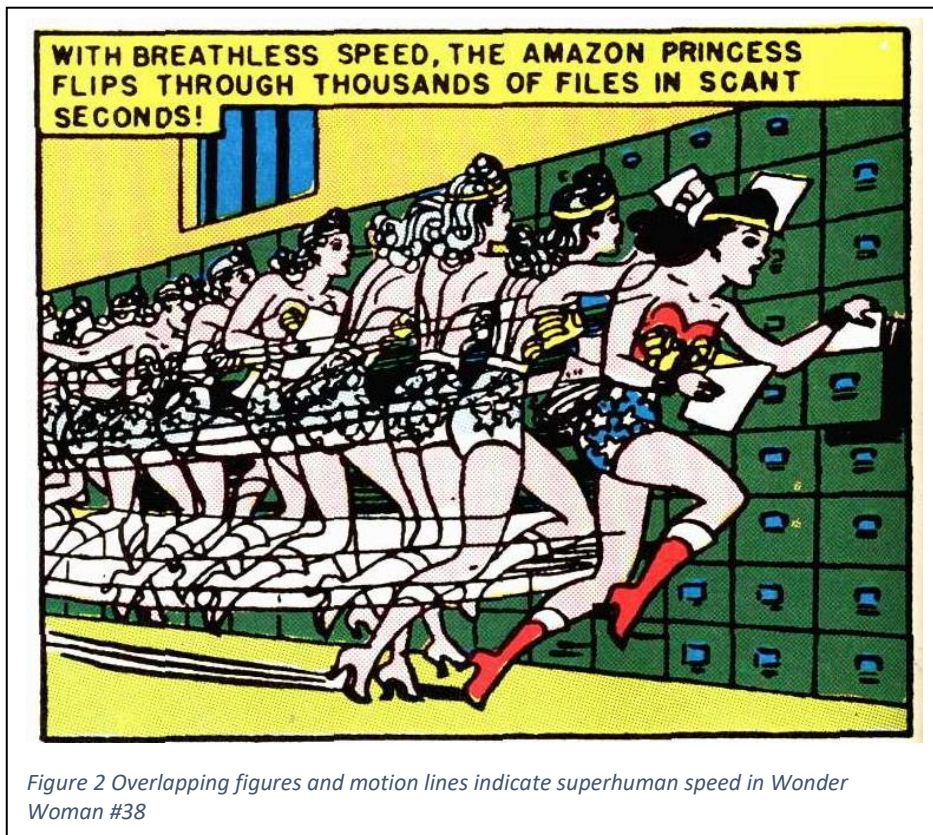
McCloud explores the myriad ways that spatial construction regulates the temporal flow of the diegetic space that readers mentally complete. A panel can represent a single moment, but more often will present a short period of time, the duration of which is indicated by pictorial cues denoting actions, and dialogue being spoken in speech balloons. Devices like motion lines can attribute speed to a body's or object's trajectory through space. Other strategies can stagnate temporal progression. For example, wide gutters between panels give a sense of a longer period of time passing, while timelessness can be suggested by removing panel borders, or having panels run right to a page's edge.<sup>29</sup> Martyn Pedler demonstrates that, in superhero comics, the centrality of characters who break the laws of physics stimulates a particularly complex array of juxtapositional devices and visual cues for representing the speeding and slowing of temporality.<sup>30</sup> A panel from *Wonder Woman* #38 demonstrates a few of these devices.<sup>31</sup> A series of overlapping figures depict Wonder Woman searching through police files, each figure presenting the superhero flipping through documents while running, connected together with

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. The discussion summarised in this paragraph is located in McCloud's chapter titled 'Time Frames', pp. 94-117.

<sup>30</sup> Martyn Pedler, 'The Fastest Man Alive: Stasis and Speed in Contemporary Superhero Comics', *Animation*, 4:3 (2009), pp. 249-263.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Kanigher (w), Harry G. Peter (a), 'The Girl from Yesterday', *Wonder Woman* #38 (November 1949) (repr. in Gloria Steinem, Phyllis Chesler and Bea Feitler (ed.), *Wonder Woman* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1972), unpaginated).

motion lines to create the sense of a frenetic search progressing down the filing cabinet at superhuman speed [Figure 2].



In his discussion of the expressivity of lines, McCloud explains that lines of varying thickness and shapes can represent not just movement and time, but different senses and emotions. Line types that elicit particular responses can be associated with different artists, publishers or kinds of story. For example,

in the mid-1960s when the average Marvel reader was pre-adolescent, popular inkers used dynamic but friendly lines à la Kirby/Sinnott... but when Marvel's reader base grew into the anxieties of adolescence, the hostile, jagged lines of a Rob Liefeld struck a more responsive chord.<sup>32</sup>

This analysis demonstrates that different line styles in superhero comics help convey not just an individual story's mood, but reflect and inform the temperament of the contemporary era and intended audience. The particular tonal effects of different line styles can also mark shifts in the ways individual superheroes are portrayed as they are passed between creative teams over the course of

<sup>32</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 126. The ellipsis indicates a transition to a new panel.

decades. For example, in *Daredevil* #10, Wally Wood's art over Bob Powell's layouts presents the eponymous hero in bold curves against a background of clearly defined forms with minimal shading [Figure 3].<sup>33</sup> This line style complements the superhero's confidence and clear-cut morality. Elsewhere, in *Daredevil Volume 2* #35, artist Alex Maleev draws figures with sharp, angular strokes, while the background is replete with scratchy shading in which objects can blend into one another [Figure 4].<sup>34</sup> This line style evokes the traumas Daredevil has suffered by this point in his continuity, and the moral decay of the world he inhabits.



Figure 3 A line style consisting of bold curves and clearly defined forms in *Daredevil* #10



Figure 4 A line style consisting of sharp, angular strokes and scratchy shading in *Daredevil Volume 2* #35

McCloud's brief history of technological limitations that led to early American comics consisting of solid bright colours provides an industrial basis for the iconic costumes worn by superheroes. The effect of these limitations was that 'while comics colors were less than expressionistic, they were fixed with a new iconic power. Because costume colors remained exactly the same, panel after panel, they came to symbolize characters in the mind of the reader'.<sup>35</sup> The enduring resonance of such iconography is

<sup>33</sup> Wally Wood (w & a) and Bob Powell (l), 'While the City Sleeps!', *Daredevil* #10 (October 1965) (repr. in Cory Sedlmeier (ed.), *Marvel Masterworks: Daredevil Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2010), pp. 200-220).

<sup>34</sup> Brian Michael Bendis (w), Alex Maleev (a) and Matt Hollingsworth (c), 'I'm not Afraid of You', *Daredevil Volume 2* #35 (September 2002) (repr. in Jennifer Grünwald (ed.), *Daredevil by Brian Bendis & Alex Maleev Ultimate Collection Vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2011), unpaginated).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

evident in the fact that, once printing technology enabled gloomy shades to pervade superhero comics in the 1980s, vivid costume iconography was still predominantly retained. For example, in *The Dark Knight Returns* the bright red on Superman's cape and the emblem on his chest provide a stark contrast to the comic's palette of greys and drained blues [Figure 5].<sup>36</sup> The iconicity of bright colours in superhero comics can therefore be harnessed to create evocative compositions that juxtapose superheroes with their surroundings and other characters.



Figure 5 Superman's bright red cape and chest emblem provide a stark contrast to the gloomy palette of *The Dark Knight Returns*

McCloud's discussion of image juxtaposition considers different transitions that can occur between panels. The images on either side of the gutter define which transition – moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect or non-sequitur – is being used.

<sup>36</sup> Frank Miller (w), and Klaus Janson (i), *The Dark Knight Returns* #1-4 (February-June 1986) (repr. in Dale Crain (ed.), *The Dark Knight Returns* (London: Titan Books, 2002)).

McCloud surveys transitions in different comics. He finds that the majority of American comics, both superhero and alternative, predominantly use action-to-action transitions. These transitions imply time flow and movement through image juxtaposition. Conversely, McCloud's analysis of Osamu Tezuka's manga finds nearly as many subject-to-subject transitions as action-to-action and, unlike in most American comics, moment-to-moment and aspect-to-aspect transitions are also used. Aspect-to-aspect transitions occur when juxtaposed panels each show 'different aspects of a place, idea or mood'.<sup>37</sup> These are 'most often used to establish a mood or a sense of place, time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations'.<sup>38</sup> Following McCloud, action-to-action transitions maintain temporal flow, aspect-to-aspect ones create a temporal vacuum. While action-to-action transitions enable superheroes' extraordinary physical abilities to be showcased, superhero comics can incorporate other strategies of panel juxtaposition to create particular effects when presenting action. For example, the top-left, bottom-left and largest panels on the opening page of *Hawkeye Volume 4 #2* are segments of the same composition, which presents the moments in which Kate Bishop and Clint Barton (both of whom go by superhero alias Hawkeye) dive into a pool to escape a hail of gunfire [Figure 6].<sup>39</sup> Nine other panels are situated in spaces effectively removed from this composition, and show different aspects of the space in these moments: guns, bathers being shot, etc.<sup>40</sup> Panels showing a swirl and a purple symbol appear to provide non-sequitur transitions, in which images on either side of a gutter bear no relation to one another, although later in the story are revealed to be details on the villains' costumes. The aspect-to-aspect transitions, rather than creating a contemplative stasis like in the cases McCloud analyses, augment the scene's urgency by isolating

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<sup>37</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 72.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>39</sup> Matt Fraction (w), David Aja (a) and Matt Hollingsworth (c). 'The Vagabond Code', *Hawkeye Volume 4 #2* (November 2012), (repr. in Jennifer Grunwald (ed.), *Hawkeye Volume 1: My Life as a Weapon* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2013), unpaginated.

<sup>40</sup> It is implied that the bottom-right panel, which provides a close view of Clint's face, occurs moments after the rest of page. The fact that this panel is the last on the page, and includes the final piece of captioned narration, suggests this temporal ordering. However, in focusing on Clint's face rather than showing a new event, this panel follows the same logic as the other eight panels that highlight different aspects of the space.



elements of threat. Furthermore, opening the comic with fragmented panels lacking context compels the reader to progress through the narrative to solve the puzzle.

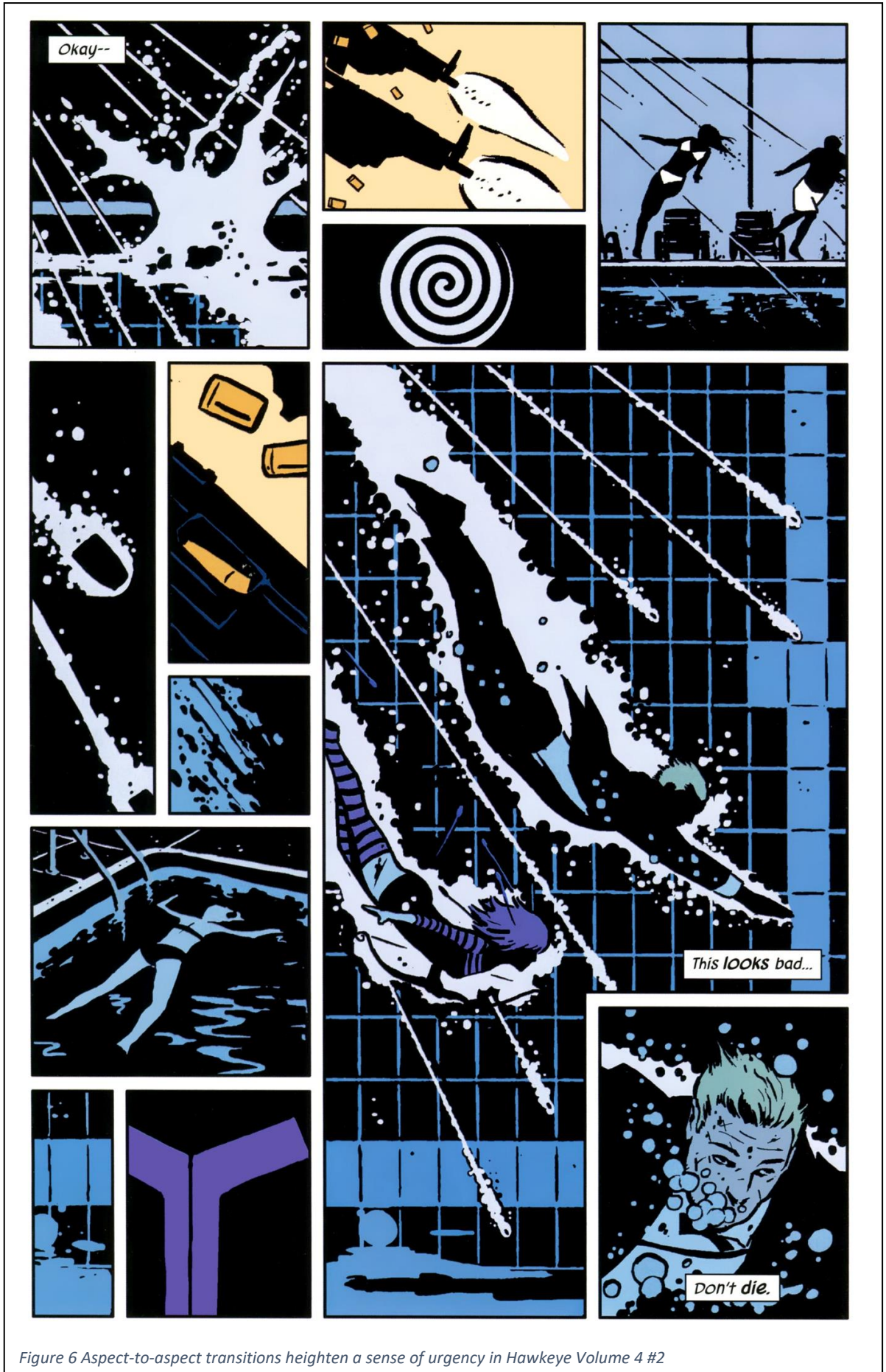


Figure 6 Aspect-to-aspect transitions heighten a sense of urgency in Hawkeye Volume 4 #2

McCloud's discussion of different modes of representation explores how we construe meaning from the totality of an image's style and form. The scope of this range is illustrated in McCloud's diagram that 'represents the total pictorial vocabulary of comics or of *any* of the visual arts' [Figure 7].<sup>41</sup> McCloud provides, for example, images of characters from Charles Schultz's cherished newspaper strip *Peanuts* and Art Spiegelman's acclaimed *Maus* alongside Superman and Batman (drawn by John Byrne and Frank Miller, respectively).<sup>42</sup> The three points that mark out the parameters on this diagram are 'reality', which pertains to photorealistic images, 'meaning', where written words present ideas, and 'the picture plane', where images are abstracted from reality and meaning. McCloud considers pictures to be *received* information, where we comprehend them instantly upon sight. Conversely, writing is *perceived* information, which requires 'specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language'.<sup>43</sup> McCloud proposes that 'when pictures are more abstracted from "reality", they require greater levels of perception, more like words... when words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures.'<sup>44</sup> This continuum between pictures and words is represented by the images that appear on the axis between reality and meaning. McCloud defines this form of abstraction as iconic. The third point on the diagram, the picture plane, represents non-iconic abstraction, 'where no attempt is made to cling to resemblance or meaning'.<sup>45</sup> In their purest form, non-iconic abstract images simply represent shapes, lines and colours. McCloud's diagram demonstrates the wide-ranging vocabulary available to pictures and words in comics, and indicates the two forms' potential for overlap. The superheroes included on McCloud's diagram are mostly situated somewhere between 'reality' and 'meaning', but closer to the former. However, as with line

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<sup>41</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 51. Emphasis in original.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Schulz, *Peanuts* (United Features Syndicate, 1950-2000); Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

<sup>43</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49. The ellipsis here indicates a transition to a new panel. This discussion relates to key debates regarding the nature of words and images that are of great pertinence to adaptation studies. These will be fully explored when I discuss literature on adaptation.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

type, the illustrative style of different superhero comics can vary greatly, and be influenced by a range of factors.

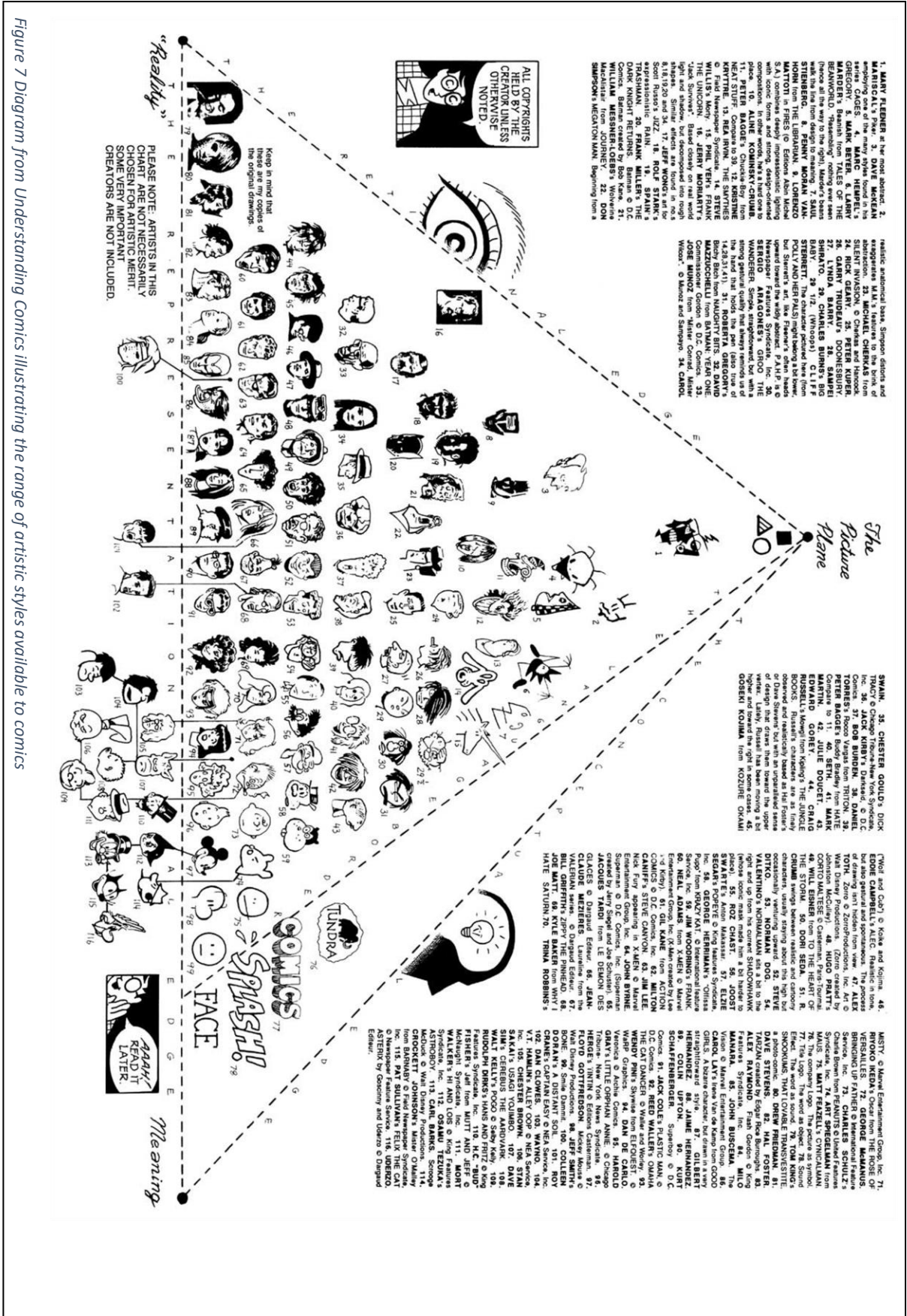


Figure 7 Diagram from Understanding Comics illustrating the range of artistic styles available to comics

McCloud's tools and principles can be combined to form complex aesthetic devices, which have been identified and explained by other scholars undertaking formal approaches. For example, Thierry Groensteen, in his widely cited *The System of Comics*, argues that the array of codes of which comics are comprised 'can only be described in terms of a *system*'.<sup>46</sup> Groensteen explores sophisticated configurations of this system that may only be evident in certain comics, and is therefore more exclusive in his approach than McCloud. Analysis of superhero comics is rare in more exclusive formalist projects, as evidenced by the fact that the only superhero comic Groensteen discusses is the acclaimed *Watchmen*.<sup>47</sup> Andrei Molotiu's exploration of abstract form in *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic books provides an intriguing exception.<sup>48</sup> Molotiu identifies and elucidates two powerful expressive devices, which he names 'sequential dynamism' and 'iconostasis'. His discussion reveals the use of aesthetic analysis for understanding ways that superhero comics elicit sensations and create meaning.

Sequential dynamism is defined as:

The formal visual energy, created by compositional and other elements internal to each panel and by the layout, that in a comic propels the reader's eye from panel to panel and from page to page, and that imparts a sense of sustained or varied visual rhythms, sometimes along the predetermined left-to-right, top-to-bottom path of reading, other times by creating alternate paths.<sup>49</sup>

This energy exuded by, say, lines that trace trajectories from panel to panel, imbues compositions with kinetic expressivity that can complement diegetic actions depicted within the images and/or prompt

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<sup>46</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 6. Italics in original. *The System of Comics* is one of the few works in the more established body of French scholarship on comics to receive an English translation. Groensteen mentions four types of critical discourse on comics in France that have been defined by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle: 'the archaeological age of the 1960s, where nostalgic authors exhumed readings from their childhoods (Lacassin 1971)'; 'the sociohistorical and philosophic age of the 1970's, where the critics established the texts in their variants, reconstituted the relationships, etc. (Le Gallo 1967; Kunzle 1973)'; 'the structuralist age (Fresnault-Deruelle 1972, 1977; Gubern 1972)'; and 'the semiotic and psychoanalytic age (Rey 1978; Apostolidès 1984; Tisseron 1985, 1987)', pp. 1-2. Due to the current lack of English translations of these works, I am unable to provide analysis of them.

<sup>47</sup> Alan Moore (w) and Dave Gibbons (a), *Watchmen* #1-12 (New York: DC Comics, September 1986-October 1987).

<sup>48</sup> Andrei Molotiu, 'Abstract Form: Sequential Dynamism and Iconostasis in Abstract Comics and Steve Ditko's *Amazing Spider-Man*' in Smith and Duncan (ed.), *Critical Approaches to Comics*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

more abstract affective responses. Molotiu argues that sequential dynamism is found 'more often in superhero and other action comics, with their emphasis on movement, on forms hurtling through space, than in alternative comics'.<sup>50</sup> The content of superhero comics thus fosters particular aesthetic configurations. Excluding such texts from aesthetic analysis obstructs examination of such devices, hindering a full appreciation of the medium's capacities.

Molotiu defines iconostasis as 'the perception of the layout of a comics page as a unified composition; perception which prompts us not so much to scan the comic from panel to panel in the accepted direction of reading, but to take it at a glance, the way we take in an abstract painting'.<sup>51</sup> Recurring elements on a page, such as patterns and colours, are arranged into striking compositions that encourage a simultaneous, rather than sequential, reading of images. While sequential dynamism evokes a sense of activity, guiding the reader's eye across the page, iconostasis harnesses the stillness of comics images to prompt the reader to regard the page in its entirety. The latter may seem antithetical to action-packed narratives. However, the centrality of iconography to superhero comics, such as in superheroes' brightly coloured costumes, makes the repetition of visual motifs across a page a core feature.

Molotiu demonstrates that sequential dynamism and iconostasis can work together to augment the meaning and effect of superhero comics. He considers how spatial symmetries in the composition of a page from *The Amazing Spider-Man* #23, and also movement within, and between, panels, evoke thematic tensions.<sup>52</sup> The page comprises three rows, the first and third featuring two identically shaped square panels, while the middle one has three identically shaped rectangular panels [Figure 8]. Thus, the layout of panels is symmetrical on both the horizontal and vertical axis. Movements within panels interrelate across the page:

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>52</sup> Stan Lee (w), Steve Ditko (a), 'The Goblin and the Gangsters', *The Amazing Spider-Man* #23 (April 1965) (repr. in Cory Sedlmeier (ed.), *Marvel Masterworks: The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 3* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2012), pp. 65-86).

In panel 2 [in the page's top-right corner], Spider-Man is shown falling away from Green Goblin, from right background to left foreground, along a downward-curving trajectory; while in panel 6 [in the page's bottom-left corner] he jumps toward Green Goblin, along a similarly downward curve, yet from left foreground to right background.<sup>53</sup>

Molotiu outlines symmetries like this across the page, which grant dynamism to the composition. He then observes that 'the contrasts in direction and movement also refer, symbolically, to the two characters who, as superhero and supervillain, are polar opposites, neatly inscribing the comic's thematic concerns into the very structure of the page'.<sup>54</sup> Formal construction therefore expresses character relations. It can also be observed that the minimalistic background detail in the panels draws the eye to the characters' actions, thus foregrounding the meanings that are evoked through movement. However, the flow of motion lines from each panel toward the next in sequence give the impression of characters moving through a predetermined space, while the page's symmetrical panel layout accentuates the diegetic space's sense of structure. Aesthetic configurations in superhero comics can therefore perform a range of intersecting functions beyond merely presenting action. The composition of the page analysed above creates an abstract sense of dynamism while also conveying thematic concerns and contributing to the mapping of diegetic space.

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<sup>53</sup> Molotiu, 'Abstract Form', p. 94. Due to the repeated use of the names Spider-Man and Green Goblin in the original text, they were abbreviated in this excerpt to SM and GG, respectively. For the sake of clarity, I have used the unabbreviated names.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 94.





Figure 8 Spatial symmetries and dynamic lines in *The Amazing Spider-Man #23*

### **Auteurism**

Like formalism, another approach that celebrates the artistic value of comics is auteurism. The evaluative criteria applied by auteur criticism significantly influence the formation of the kind of

exclusive canons observed above in Eisner's and Groensteen's studies. As noted, these canons tend to largely exclude superhero comics.

Ascribing the figure of an individual author to a text is a culturally pervasive way to assign artistic worth to the text. Joseph Witek's study of the autobiographical comics of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar exemplifies the application of traditional auteurist criticism to comics.<sup>55</sup> Witek uses the creators' oeuvres and biographical details to evaluate and explain the texts' unique traits. These texts ideally lend themselves to such analysis, since they are explicitly about their creators. Conversely, superhero texts are typically about characters who are not unique to specific creators, but are owned instead by the publisher.<sup>56</sup> As such, superheroes are often associated with corporate brands, rather than individual voices. The most popular superheroes have had hundreds of different creators work on them throughout their publication history. Since the 1980s, containing the serialisation and plural authorship of particular texts is one strategy through which publishers have sought to circumvent the cultural devaluing of superhero comics. Texts such as *Watchmen* (1986-1987), *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on a Serious Earth* (1989) were published as either self-contained limited comic book series or graphic novels, with consistent and small creative teams working on the whole narrative.<sup>57</sup> Each of these texts has been widely acclaimed and their writers – Alan Moore, Frank Miller and Grant Morrison, respectively – subjects of auteurist analysis.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Joseph Witek, *Comics Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989).

<sup>56</sup> Marvel and DC own the rights to all the superheroes in comic books they publish. Individual creators may own the rights to superhero texts published by independent publishers. *Invincible*, co-created by writer Robert Kirkman and artist Cory Walker, published by Image Comics, is an example of a creator-owned superhero comic book. Robert Kirkman (w), Cory Walker (a), Bill Crabtree (a), et al. *Invincible* #1- (Berkeley: Image Comics, January 2003- ).

<sup>57</sup> Grant Morrison (w) and Dave McKean (a), *Batman: Arkham Asylum 15th Anniversary Edition* (London: Titan Books, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Examples include an edited collection dedicated to *Watchmen* (Richard Bensam (ed.), *Minutes to Midnight: Twelve Essays on Watchmen* (Edwardsville: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2010)); Richard Reynolds detailed analysis of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* in *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp. 95-118; and an edited collection on Grant Morrison's superhero comics (Darragh Greene and Kate Roddy (ed.), *Grant Morrison and the Superhero Renaissance: Critical Essays* (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, 2015).

Interestingly, acknowledged comics auteurs Pekar and Spiegelman have also acted as critics, their status within the medium giving them a certain authority for deciding which texts are worthy of canonisation. Both celebrate certain comics featuring superheroes by placing the comics in opposition to other superhero texts. In an article for *The Comics Journal* discussing the formal and narrative potential of comics, Pekar brands superhero comics in general as undeserving of individual study.<sup>59</sup> However, he isolates and celebrates 'exceptions', citing Will Eisner's *Spirit* and Jack Cole's *Plastic Man* as examples that rise above other superhero comics by offering the authors' unique satirical spins on the genre's conventions.<sup>60</sup> Spiegelman and Chip Kidd's study of Cole's *Plastic Man* salvages the texts from the superhero genre in much the same way as Pekar:

Although I'm slightly embarrassed to confess to being in love with a super-hero comic, Jack Cole's *Plastic Man* belongs high on any adult's How to Avoid Prozac list, up there with S.J. Perelman, Laurel and Hardy, Damon Runyon, Tex Avery, and the Marx Brothers.<sup>61</sup>

Spiegelman and Kidd therefore extract *Plastic Man* from other superhero texts and place it in a canon of cherished and acclaimed entertainment. The analysis is decidedly auteurist, situating discussion of Cole's life, career and character alongside reprints of his comics to outline correlations. Through doing so, the comics' idiosyncrasies are illuminated and celebrated.

The acclaimed 1980s texts and their creators are celebrated through constructing the same opposition. For example, Richard Reynolds states that with *Watchmen*, creators 'Moore and [Dave] Gibbons have produced a text which *transcends* the accumulated myths through which superhero texts are read – they have, so to speak, *stretched the boundaries* of the genre'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Peter Coogan states:

as a result of his critical and commercial success Morrison operates as an auteur, which gives him the freedom to explore and experiment with the genre, resulting in richer, more interesting texts

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<sup>59</sup> Harvey Pekar, 'The Potential of Comics', *The Comics Journal*, 123 (1988), p. 83.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>61</sup> Art Spiegelman and Chip Kidd, *Jack Cole and Plastic Man: Forms Stretched to their Limits* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), p. 7. The written analysis is liberally interspersed with Cole's art, comics and other relevant documents. The writing is credited to Spiegelman and the book's design to Kidd.

<sup>62</sup> Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), p. 117. My emphasis.

that *push the genre envelope* and reveal something more about the genre than more formulaic stories.<sup>63</sup>

Both Reynolds and Coogan present a model in which superhero conventions present an artistically limiting sphere in which texts operate. Only certain accomplished creators are able to push and stretch the sphere's boundaries.

Auteurist discussions of comics thus inaugurate texts into canons of artistically valuable works by either implicitly or explicitly placing them in opposition to the superhero genre. These discourses suggest that, while auteurist comics are uncompromised expressions of an individual artist's unique ideas, superhero comics are produced in an economically motivated and corporately monitored system that generates a homogenous body of texts. The binary logic underpinning this segregation of auteurist and genre works recur in discourse on other media, particularly film, and have influenced critical approaches to genre works.

### ***Genre Critique***

Genre studies offers ways to analyse and appreciate groups of texts that are often critically dismissed, but is not without pitfalls. Steve Neale outlines two main motivations behind the establishment of cinematic genre studies in the 1960s and 1970s: 'one was a desire to engage in a serious and positive way with popular cinema in general and with Hollywood in particular. The other was a desire to complement, temper or displace altogether the dominant approach used hitherto - auteurism'.<sup>64</sup> Genre criticism sought to remedy the failures of auteurism, a major one being, as outlined above, its tendency to overlook and condemn vast bodies of texts seen as commercial product rather than artistic

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Coogan 'Genre: Reconstructing the Superhero in *All Star Superman*', in Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (ed.), *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 209. My emphasis.

<sup>64</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 10. Like auteurs working on superhero comic books, individual film directors who predominantly make genre films can be celebrated through analysis of the idiosyncratic inflections they offer on genre conventions. For example, in his essay 'The Evolution of the Western', André Bazin discusses the significant role that the subjective approaches of directors like John Ford and Nicholas Ray played in the Western genre's development. Rather than seeing genre as determining a director's sensibility, Bazin outlines a dialogue between the two. However, as the opposition between auteurism and genre criticism indicates, many approaches to genre in film studies overlook the role of individual directors. André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 149-157.

works. However, Neale observes that a similar exclusivity pervades much genre criticism: 'rather than looking in full at the nature of Hollywood's output either in general or at any particular point in time genre criticism has tended to concern itself with exemplary films and canons of excellence'.<sup>65</sup> Paradoxically, the exclusivity that genre criticism sought to counter resurfaces in the canons of exceptional works that it tends to form.

This tendency is exemplified by Geoff Klock's study of superhero comics, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, which forms and analyses a canon of 'revisionary' texts.<sup>66</sup> Klock acknowledges the exclusivity of such an approach:

What should be emphasized in the use of the word *revisionary* here is not "revise" but "visionary". In the latter sense, it is not a value-neutral term... This study, which nowhere claims to be exhaustive, presents an argument only through those superhero comic books that are both strong and representative.<sup>67</sup>

In classifying his selected 'visionary' texts as strong, Klock implies that texts which do not make the canon are weak and unworthy of study. Despite claiming this canon to be 'representative', Klock only discusses texts from the 1980s onwards that in some way interrogate or refashion genre conventions, ignoring superhero comics from the previous four decades. A study that purports to illuminate the value of superhero comics thus does so through logical moves comparable to those deployed by auteurism: placing a select group of exceptional texts in opposition to swathes of unremarkable texts that merely follow convention.

Although approaches like Klock's are only interested in texts that usurp convention, genre criticism can be useful for examining the significance of conventional features (such as motifs, thematic concerns and narrative structures) and their scope for variation. In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Peter Coogan formulates a definition of the superhero genre based around the figure the superhero, who he defines as:

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>66</sup> Geoff Klock. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17. Emphasis in original.

A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically expresses his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret.<sup>68</sup>

The three 'primary conventions' that Coogan elaborates on are powers, mission and identity.<sup>69</sup> He argues that the unique ways that these traits combine differentiate the superhero from other heroic figures. Within Coogan's definition, the potential for variation begins to emerge. For example, superpowers can be biological, technological or magical. Coogan also provides significant analysis of the supervillain, who he outlines as 'one of the markers of the superhero genre'.<sup>70</sup> Coogan's identification and analysis of different types of supervillain again sketches out scope for fluctuation.<sup>71</sup>

Typical of his character-centric approach, the only element of style and form that Coogan analyses in detail are superhero costumes. Coogan uses McCloud's discussion of iconic abstraction and expressive colours to demonstrate that a superhero's identity is abstracted into their costume, which acts as an iconic representation of their powers and mission.<sup>72</sup> Each superhero's costume comprises a unique configuration of symbols and colours that represent their specific inflection of the genre's conventions. The centrality of the superhero costume to the genre has led to extensive analysis of it elsewhere. For example, in *The Superhero Costume: Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction*, Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon elaborate on ways the costume embodies the genre's core concerns and reveals different approaches to its conventions, while also exploring the costume's relation to real-life sociocultural practices.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), p. 30.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* Coogan identifies five main types of supervillain: 'the monster, the enemy commander, the mad scientist, the criminal mastermind, and the inverted superhero' (p. 61), and four sub-types: 'the alien, the evil god, the femme fatale, and the super-henchman' (p. 74).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.

<sup>73</sup> Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon. *The Superhero Costume: Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Many observers have connected the thematic concerns that the superhero embodies with those of the Western genre. For example, John Shelton Lawrence and Richard Jewett discuss both genres as exemplars of their conceptualisation of the 'American monomyth'.<sup>74</sup> Lawrence and Jewett define this archetypal narrative as such:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity.<sup>75</sup>

The figures of the Westerner (a name that Robert Warshow gives to the archetypal hero of Westerns in his influential examination of this figure) and the superhero share a lonesome but righteous mission that is rooted in the same cultural discourses about individualism and heroism.<sup>76</sup> This shared genealogy suggests that discussions of the Western's conventions can be instructive when exploring the superhero genre's generic makeup.

To map the core concerns of the Western genre, Jim Kitses produces 'a structuralist grid focused around the frontier's dialectical play of forces embodied in the master binary opposition of the wilderness and civilisation'.<sup>77</sup> The oppositions on this grid identify foundational thematic tensions in a genre's architecture. The master opposition of wilderness and civilisation encompasses sub-groups of oppositions – the individual and the community, nature and culture, and the West and the East – each of which contain six more specific oppositions. Thematic tensions also emerge from critical discussions of the superhero genre. In an essay on the configuration of superhero conventions in *All-Star Superman*, Coogan lists the genre's defining features as 'the selfless pro-social mission, superpowers,

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<sup>74</sup> John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 105-124. The essay in which the Westerner is discussed is titled 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner'.

<sup>77</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood*, new edn (London: British Film Institute, 2004), p. 13. The grid is featured on p. 12.

the codename, the costume, the origin, science-fictional science, and the urban setting'.<sup>78</sup> Similar lists appear in other studies. Reynolds traces the genre back to its origin in *Action Comics #1* and identifies the key tropes already present in this initial text as 'lost parents', 'the man-god', 'justice', 'the normal and the superpowered', 'the secret identity', 'superpowers and politics' and 'science as magic'.<sup>79</sup> Coogan's and Reynolds' lists both implicitly or explicitly outline tensions central to the genre: superpowers and normality, superhero and civilian identities, justice and criminality, etc.

The thematic tensions that comprise the Western and superhero genres overlap in certain ways, but each genre applies distinct modifications to shared concerns. Each takes a hero whose extraordinary abilities are contextualised outside of prevailing social structures – in either the wilderness or realms of fantasy – and situates them within the wider populace. While the Westerner negotiates the adventure of the frontier and emerging structures of industrial culture, the superhero is even more explicitly divided into two identities, one of which performs fantastic feats while the other integrates into modern society. The ways in which a genre's thematic tensions are articulated thus differentiate it from genres with similar concerns. Meanwhile, the diverse ways genre works can configure their underpinning tensions reveal variation within the genre. As explained by Neale, the elements on Kitses grid 'relate to one another in shifting dynamic and dialectical ways rather than in rigid or fixed ones'.<sup>80</sup> A Western or, following the genealogical link, a superhero text, can deploy conventional thematic oppositions to unique effect, choosing to amplify, inflect or blend elements in specific ways. These tensions therefore not only sketch the genre's parameters, but enable appreciation of its scope for variation.

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<sup>78</sup> Peter Coogan, 'Genre: Reconstructing the Superhero in *All Star Superman*', in Smith and Duncan (ed.). *Critical Approaches to Comics*, p. 203; Grant Morrison (w), Frank Quitely (p) and Jamie Grant (i & c), *All-Star Superman #1-12* (New York: DC Comics, January 2006-October 2008).

<sup>79</sup> Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, pp. 12-16.

<sup>80</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 135,



Another means of mapping and appreciating variation in genres is the identification of developmental stages. Thomas Schatz identifies four stages of generic evolution. He argues that each Hollywood genre will have

an *experimental* stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a *classic* stage, in which the conventions reach their “equilibrium” and are mutually understood by artist and audience, an age of *refinement*, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a *baroque* (or ‘mannerist’ or ‘self-reflexive’) stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the “substance” or “content” of the work.<sup>81</sup>

Different textual configurations typify each stage. For example, texts that parody a genre’s conventions emerge in the age of refinement.<sup>82</sup> Each stage reworks or reframes a genre’s underpinning formula: ‘[w]e are dealing here with the artistry of the formula itself as it grows and develops’.<sup>83</sup> Narrative and aesthetic structures evolve as the primary interest of texts in a genre shifts from telling stories to formalist self-reflection on the genre’s storytelling mechanisms. Thus, applying developmental stages reveals that the centrality of formula to genre does not cause stagnation, but rather provides a pliable framework through which development and change is implemented.

Coogan demonstrates that Schatz’s stages of generic evolution can be mapped onto the ages that have been widely applied to superhero comics by fans and critics.<sup>84</sup> These ages track discernable shifts in the genre’s ‘nexus of concerns, storytelling techniques, marketing strategies, styles of art and writing, and approaches to genre conventions’.<sup>85</sup> The ages are subject to continued contestation, although there are some points of unanimous agreement, such as *Action Comics* #1 instigating the Golden Age of superhero comics. Coogan argues the ‘general consensus’ for the ages’ names and parameters are

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<sup>81</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), pp. 37-38.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>84</sup> As Coogan notes, differentiation between the ages of American comics and ages of American superhero Comics is often unclear and subject to debate (*Superhero*, p. 271). Due to the focus of my project, I will be specifically referring to the ages of American superhero comics. For a discussion and of the ages of American comics see Duncan and Smith’s formulation of the different ages as eras of Invention, Proliferation, Diversification, Retrenchment, Connection, Independence, Ambition and Reiteration. Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics*, pp. 20-84.

<sup>85</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, p. 193.

the Golden Age (1938-1954), Silver Age (1954-1971), Bronze Age (1971-1980), Iron Age (1980-1987 for DC, 1980-2000 for Marvel) and Renaissance Age, which we are currently in.<sup>86</sup> The first four of these correlate with Schatz's stages.<sup>87</sup> Coogan posits that the texts produced in the Renaissance Age comprise a fifth stage that indicates Schatz's four stages have been completed. Coogan sees the Renaissance as an era of *reconstruction*, in which the conventions that were deconstructed in the Iron Age are 'reestablished in ways that incorporate an understanding of the genre's completed cycle'.<sup>88</sup> The superhero genre has been through all of the shifts that Schatz outlines and reached a stage where the genre's narrative and formal structures are reconstituted to deliver familiar pleasures alongside a knowing appreciation of the structures themselves. Schatz's stages help illuminate the particular nature of the changes that the superhero genre has gone through during its history, elaborating not just relations between texts, but also between texts and fans.

While applying stages of evolution to a genre enables an appreciation of variation, the practice also limits this appreciation. Imposing a neat, predictable model of linear development on all genres denies more heterogeneous strands of dialogue between texts. To demonstrate the inadequacy of schematically mapping Schatz's stages onto a genre, Neale discusses, for example, how Westerns released in the 1920s, which would be the genre's first stage, can be very self-conscious.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, Coogan's adherence to Schatz's model causes him to repress significant qualities of texts when those qualities do not fit with the age in which the text was produced. For example, Coogan proposes that 'Captain Marvel and Plastic Man best exemplify the Golden Age with their simpler and more humorous

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. 193-194. Coogan also adds an age of precursors that influenced the genre's creation, which he dubs the Antediluvian Age. An example of an alternate delegation of ages is offered by Grant Morrison, who collapses the Bronze and Iron Ages into the Dark Age. Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011).

<sup>87</sup> Schatz's discussion also provides a rationale for why the revisionary texts produced in the Iron Age/baroque stage, along with earlier superhero comics that satire the genre's conventions, are the most likely to be considered auteurist works. Schatz explains that formally transparent texts tend to be critiqued in terms of their storytelling and social value, while formally reflexive texts are evaluated on the basis of their aesthetic value, which frames their creators as artists. Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 41.

<sup>88</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, p. 198.

<sup>89</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 212.

approach to superheroics.<sup>90</sup> However, as illustrated earlier by Pekar and Spiegelman, *Plastic Man* self-reflexively plays with superhero conventions. In a move that contradicts genre criticism's goal of celebrating genre works, applying ages thus risks overlooking the unique qualities of particular texts. Elsewhere, Coogan does note the parodic tone of *Plastic Man*.<sup>91</sup> He also provides earlier examples of parody in the Golden Age as evidence that the superhero genre's conventions were widely accepted from early on.<sup>92</sup> Such occurrences disrupt Schatz's model, which states parody occurs at the end of the second stage. Coogan rationalises this rupture by suggesting that mini cycles operate within ages, and thus each age is marked by parodies of its output.<sup>93</sup> The need for such qualifications reveals that genres do not adhere to linear developmental models, as does the fact Coogan provides different end points to the Iron Age for DC and Marvel.

Mapping stages onto genres also obscures the unique forms that a particular genre's variations may take. Saige Walton provides a further challenge to Schatz's model, arguing that, rather than having a baroque stage, genre itself is baroque, and the superhero genre's specific traits exemplify the plural openness of genres.<sup>94</sup> The traits Walton elaborates are: serialisation, the constant renewal of superheroes, the simultaneous existence of different approaches to a character in different media, and the genre's predilection for hybridity.

Walton argues that the revival of the Flash in *Showcase #4*, which is typically considered the birth of the Silver Age, demonstrates that superhero comics were reflecting on and refashioning past characters long before their designated baroque stage in the 1980s.<sup>95</sup> The ongoing nature of a superhero's narrative places them in a perpetual process of being reborn and reformed after periods of stability. One could be tempted to apply fixed stages to an individual superhero's development, as

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<sup>90</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, p. 205.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>94</sup> Saige Walton, 'Baroque Mutants in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?'

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95; Robert Kanigher (w), Carmine Infantino (p) and Joe Kubert (i), 'Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt!' and 'The Man Who Broke the Time Barrier!', *Showcase #4* (October 1956) (repr. in Liz Erickson, *The Flash: The Silver Age Vol. 1* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2016)), pp. 7-30).

Marc DiPaolo does. DiPaolo argues 'superhero narratives that remain in constant production for decades tend to follow four stages of narrative development'.<sup>96</sup> The stages he outlines have obvious parallels with Schatz's stages. The first represents experimentation and formal transparency, the second finds an equilibrium, the third skips refinement and goes straight into self-reflexivity, while the fourth corresponds to Coogan's stage of reconstruction. However, as we have seen with genres, individual superheroes also refuse to neatly develop along linear paths. For example, Will Brooker's analysis of *Batman* comic books from the 1950s provides textual evidence of narratives satirising the heteronormalisation enforced upon Batman and Robin by the Comics Code.<sup>97</sup> Thus, in an era when *Batman* texts should have been in DiPaolo's second stage, in which formula is reproduced for commercial gain, they were in fact reflecting on the characters' forms and expressing subversive ideas.<sup>98</sup>

The fact that superhero texts were appearing in various media within a few years of the genre's genesis creates new avenues for variation. Walton argues that each medium's specific properties will accordingly reconfigure a superhero, while the simultaneous availability of different incarnations of a superhero in different media offers great scope for plurality.<sup>99</sup> The number and kinds of media in which a genre appears shape the range of forms it can take. The presence of the superhero genre in media from comics and novels to radio and films means that the media-determined forces influencing its narrative and aesthetic structures are distinct from those influencing a genre like the musical, which is only prominent in theatre and film.

Genre criticism, in identifying the parameters of genres, is equipped to look not just at the dialogue between texts within genres, but also between genres. Walton proposes that '[a]rguably, the

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<sup>96</sup> Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2011), pp. 30-31.

<sup>97</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, pp. 145-158. This heteronormalisation was enforced following Wertham's denunciation of queer sentiments that he detected in *Batman* comic books, infamously describing Batman and Robin's domestic life 'a wish dream of two homosexuals living together'. Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, p. 190.

<sup>98</sup> DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes*, p. 31.

<sup>99</sup> Walton, 'Baroque Mutants in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?', pp. 97-98.

superhero genre is one of the most historically hybrid of all'.<sup>100</sup> Henry Jenkins provides an industrial rationale for the superhero genre's proclivity for hybridity: while the range of popular genres in cinema offer differentiation, the dominance of a single genre in comics means that 'difference is felt much more powerfully *within* a genre than *between* competing genres and genre mixing is the norm'.<sup>101</sup> Superhero comics can distinguish themselves from the scores of other superhero comics released every month by offering unique combinations of the superhero genre's and other genres' conventions. For example, *Blade* and *Legion of Super-Heroes* comics pointedly fuse superhero tropes with horror and science fiction tropes, respectively. The generic frameworks individual superheroes inhabit can also shift from text to text. For example, *Wolverine* deploys tropes of the Japanese samurai genre in a tale of romance and organised crime, while *Wolverine and the X-Men: Volume 1* strikes a broadly comedic tone and combines the eponymous superhero-cum-headmaster's adventures with high school drama.<sup>102</sup> These hybrid texts suggest a great potential for malleability in superhero conventions. A final quality of the superhero genre that is the cause of much variation is the existence of a large number of different superheroes concurrently negotiating narratives spanning decades. As has become evident from the above analysis, each superhero establishes individual motifs and tropes within the wider genre's conventions. Approaches to a superhero can shift from text to text, while some critics have even applied developmental stages to superhero franchises. In other words, individual superheroes perform the function of genres in significant ways. Each superhero comprises a distinct set of conventions that are explored and reconfigured in an expanding body of texts. The array of distinct formations that any one superhero can take reveals the breadth of the wider genre to which they all belong. As a result, different superheroes, and their diverse past permutations need to be discussed to appreciate the superhero genre's complexity. My chosen case studies comprise some

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>101</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Just Men in Tights': Rewriting Silver Age Comics in an Era of Multiplicity' in Ndalianis (ed.), *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, p. 17. Emphasis in original.

<sup>102</sup> Chris Claremont (w), Frank Miller (p), Josef Rubinstein (i), et al. *Wolverine* #1-4 (New York: Marvel Comics, September 1982-December 1982); Jason Aaron (w), Chris Bachalo (a), Tim Townsend (i), et al. *Wolverine and the X-Men* #1-42 (New York: Marvel Comics, December 2011-April 2014).

of the most popular superheroes, each with long textual histories. This selection enables me to explore dialogue between texts concerning a particular superhero as well as dialogue between superheroes. Furthermore, the fact that *The Avengers* is a team film that features multiple superheroes from their own solo-texts enables examination of how this dialogue is explicated and managed within texts.

Genre criticism offers methods for examining and understanding groups of texts that are otherwise often overlooked or deemed underserving of critical attention. Some of these approaches construct restrictive moulds into which genre texts are forced. Others provide productive tools for examining the non-linear interactions that occur within and between genres as conventions are reconfigured along diverse and intersecting paths. These tools that illuminate variation can be fruitfully combined with analysis of style and form. In this thesis I will undertake such an approach, exploring ways in which superhero texts' style and form articulates and remolds the genre's conventions. This kind of approach is rarely practiced. Neale states: 'partly, perhaps, because Hollywood's genres have so often been regarded as aesthetically impoverished, genre theory has frequently concerned itself instead with their socio-cultural significance'.<sup>103</sup> Ideological critique is particularly prevalent in analysis of superhero texts. Although this is not an approach I will undertake, it is necessary to survey the methodologies practiced in this area, and the kinds of meaning they identify in superhero texts.

### ***Ideological Critique***

Different conceptualisations of ideology approach a range of social and/or economic phenomena in distinct ways. Terry Eagleton instructively identifies two broad schools of thought:

Roughly speaking, one central lineage, from Hegel and Marx to Georg Lukacs and some later Marxist thinkers, has been much preoccupied with ideas of true and false cognition, with ideology as illusion, distortion and mystification; whereas an alternative tradition of thought has been less epistemological than sociological, concerned more with the function of ideas within social life than with their reality or unreality.<sup>104</sup>

In the epistemological sense, ideology primarily concerns economic reality. Ideas that benefit the ruling classes perpetuate a false perception of reality that covers over the economic model on which

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<sup>103</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 220.

<sup>104</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 3.

a society is based. This 'false consciousness' keeps subordinated social groups from comprehending the true nature of reality. Rather than binding ideas to economic structures, sociological approaches are concerned with the operation and exchange of ideas in social reality. A significant difference is that, whereas in the epistemological approach only the ideas that govern society are deemed ideology, the various sets of ideas that the sociological approach examines are each considered to be *an* ideology. The shift is from ideology pertaining to just one set of ideas, to different sets of contested ideas, each being ideologies. Epistemological approaches deploy ideology as a pejorative term, whereas in sociological approaches the word itself is neutral.

Epistemological and sociological approaches frame popular culture's relationship to the ideas that govern society very differently. In the epistemological approach, popular culture embodies and perpetuates the false consciousness that maintains ideology. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's influential essay 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' forcefully presents this view.<sup>105</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the entertainment industries are dependent on, and the shape of their product determined by, economic organisations, such as banks and energy providers, that wield power over society.<sup>106</sup> Having economic structures controlling the entertainment industries leads to popular culture being viewed as a homogenous block that endorses and propagates the structures that govern society. From a sociological perspective, popular culture can be a site where different ideas are exchanged, some of which endorse while others challenge society's governing structures. Since ideas are passed around within social reality, popular texts are not inscribed with the ideology of the economic organisations through which they are produced, but with the ideologies of the social groups who created them. In this model, popular texts are heterogeneous and can encapsulate different sets of conflicting ideas.

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<sup>105</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972) (repr. in Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, Routledge, 1999), pp. 31-41).

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Umberto Eco's essay 'The Myth of Superman' exemplifies the most stringent epistemological critiques of superhero comics.<sup>107</sup> Eco argues that a superhero 'must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore, he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable', yet at the same time must be able to develop and appear capable of unforeseeable change.<sup>108</sup> To reconcile these contradictory requirements, superheroes progress through individual stories, which can alter the diegetic world in unique ways, yet this world is always reset back to equilibrium at the end of the story. Eco asserts that the ideological function of this form of iterative storytelling is to accustom the reader to the idea of society being fixed and immobile, thus blinding the individual to their personal responsibility and ability to contribute to social change.<sup>109</sup> The fact that superheroes' battles promote civil, rather than political, consciousness, also upholds the status quo.<sup>110</sup> Superheroes fight visible crime and aid charity, rather than using their extraordinary powers to pursue paradigmatic political shifts. The nature of superhero texts' serialisation and content thus perpetuates a false consciousness that presents the governing social structures as immutable and natural.

The reiteration of formula in superhero texts is what makes them, and genre works more broadly, particularly susceptible to ideological critique that concerns the continuous perpetuation of the same ideas. As discussed earlier, mapping developmental stages on to genres provides a means of drawing texts out of stasis and acknowledging shifts that occur over time. Writing in 1972, Eco was discussing superhero comics prior to subversive post-Silver Age developments that many critics have identified and championed. Like Eco, Reynolds frames his study of superheroes around their function as emblematic myths. However, Reynolds proposes that these myths were destabilised from the 1960s onwards when superhero texts began to be set against unsteady social backdrops, which reflected the

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<sup>107</sup> Umberto Eco, 'The Myth of Superman', *Diacritics*, 2:1 (1972), pp. 14-22. Although Eco analyses Superman in particular, he makes clear that his arguments are true for all superheroes.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.



diluting of the U.S.'s hold on global culture in the Cold War period.<sup>111</sup> Grant Morrison argues that a key text to bring superhero comics out of the Silver Age and challenge their underlying sociopolitical assumptions was Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams' 1970's run on *Green Lantern*, in which the eponymous superhero teamed up with Green Arrow, and the pair were confronted with a different social issue in each story.<sup>112</sup> Narratives that interrogate the mythological foundations of superhero ideology have in particular been identified in the 'revisionist' comics of the 1980s. For example, Reynolds asserts that *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* both undertake a 'reconstruction of superhero ideology'.<sup>113</sup> By placing texts on a timeline that illuminates intertextual dialogue through which ideas are exchanged and challenged, such critiques deploy a more sociological model of ideology. Approaches to genre that illuminate variation thus complement sociological critiques of the genre's ideological workings.

When periodising superhero comics, there is a tendency to consider Golden Age comics as conservative, and those from later decades as more subversive. This tendency is particularly apparent in discussion of the two groups of superhero comics that have been subject to some of the most frequent ideological analysis: texts released during World War II, and texts responding to 9/11. The former is typically seen to function as conservative propaganda, while a range of political sentiments are identified in the latter.

For example, in his analysis of propaganda in 1940s *Captain America* comic books, Christopher Murray argues that the texts mythologise, and thus present as natural, patriotic values that uphold a conservative ideology.<sup>114</sup> Murray importantly notes that *Captain America* was initially published when American opinion was divided over intervening in World War II. Consequently, the first issue 'does not simply "reflect" American feeling at this turbulent point in history, but is a contribution to the great

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<sup>111</sup> Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>112</sup> Morrison, *Supergods*, p. 145; Denny O'Neil (w), Neal Adams (p), Dick Giordano (i), et al. *Green Lantern Volume 2* #76-87 and #89 (New York: DC Comics, April 1970-May 1972).

<sup>113</sup> Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, p. 83.

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Murray, 'Propaganda: The Pleasures of Persuasion in *Captain America*', in Smith and Duncan (ed.), *Critical Approaches to Comics*, pp. 129-141.

debate, and an unequivocal one'.<sup>115</sup> Although Murray primarily discusses notions of epistemology, his concern with how ideas are introduced and pitted against others also exhibits qualities of sociological ideological critique.

Cord Scott similarly analyses strategies through which superhero comics produced during World War II naturalise a conservative ideology, then discusses post-9/11 comics that present alternative modes of thought.<sup>116</sup> For instance, Scott argues that 'the political nature of comics changed on September 11, 2001... unlike the comics of World War II that depicted the enemies of the United States in base stereotypes, the comics from this event tried to be more even-handed'.<sup>117</sup> In exploring how post-9/11 comics seek to de-mystify demonising depictions of the Other perpetuated by previous comics and in wider cultural discourse, ideas underpinning both the epistemological and sociological models of ideology are combined. Jenkins deploys a more firmly sociological methodology in his analysis of ways in which post-9/11 superhero comics circulate an array of different ideas, often reflecting on and dismantling myths that underpin the genre and American culture.<sup>118</sup> The association of superhero comics and myth thus forms a recurrent concern of ideological approaches to the genre. However, these myths, like a genre's formula, can be configured and presented in diverse ways that invite both epistemological and sociological ideological critiques.

Ideological critiques of superhero films have also been prevalent following 9/11. The superhero genre's association with myth is again a central focus of both epistemological and sociological critiques, which offer opposed readings. For example, Hassler-Forest argues that 2000s superhero films remove the 9/11 attacks from political discourse by harnessing the mythological qualities of the superhero to narrativise American exceptionalism and the nation's heroism in the face of victimisation.<sup>119</sup> By

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>116</sup> Cord Scott, 'Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40:2 (2007), pp. 325-343.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>118</sup> Henry Jenkins, 'Captain America Sheds His Mighty Tears: Comics and September 11' in Sherman and Nardin (ed.), *Terror, Culture, Politics*, pp. 69-102.

<sup>119</sup> Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes*.

functioning this way, the films align with and naturalise George Bush's ideology and the dominant media response to 9/11. Conversely, Terence McSweeney argues that, while Hollywood films that directly deal with 9/11 contribute to the mythologisation of conservative discourses, fantasy films made following the attacks often use allegory to critically reflect on sociopolitical contexts.<sup>120</sup> McSweeney discusses superhero films as a key site for such critical explorations in a chapter pertinently subtitled 'Challenging American Mythology in the Superhero Genre'.<sup>121</sup>

The films analysed in this thesis have already been subject to these kinds of ideological critique. For example, Thomas Andrae and Michael Soares provide different ideological accounts of *Superman* in their surveys of texts, including *Superman: The Movie*, from throughout the character's history.<sup>122</sup> Following Eco, Andrae primarily takes an epistemological approach, concluding that *Superman* texts 'reproduce the consumerist ideology of late capitalism' in both the stories they tell and their circular narratives that perpetuate the illusion of social structures being unchangeable.<sup>123</sup> Soares offers a more sociological reading of Superman's development, arguing that there has been a general shift in the ideas that the character embodies, 'from American exceptionalism to globalization'.<sup>124</sup> The *Spider-Man* films' engagement with the post-9/11 landscape have been framed in varying ways. Hassler-Forest argues that the first film's utopian presentation of a commodified New York portrays neoliberal capitalism as benevolent.<sup>125</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, spectacular scenes of superheroics are said to offer a fantasy of overcoming the fears and restrictions of urban life, while encouraging audiences to accept the status of passive consumers.<sup>126</sup> Conversely, Jeanne Holland provides an allegorical reading

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<sup>120</sup> Terence McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 17-20.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111-134.

<sup>122</sup> Thomas Andrae, 'From Menace to Messiah: The History and Historicity of Superman', in Donald Lazere (ed.), *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 124-138; Michael Soares, 'The Man of Tomorrow: Superman from American Exceptionalism to Globalization', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 48:4 (2015), pp. 747-761.

<sup>123</sup> Andrae, 'From Menace to Messiah', p. 133. Andrae's comments that directly pertain to *Superman: The Movie* can be found on pp. 134-135.

<sup>124</sup> Soares, 'The Man of Tomorrow'.

<sup>125</sup> Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes*, pp. 127-131.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131-140.

of *Spider-Man 2*, arguing that the film mounts oppositions to sentiments perpetuated by the U.S. government following 9/11.<sup>127</sup> Films set in the MCU, including *The Avengers*, have also been discussed in relation to 9/11. Tanner Mirrlees argues that *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) exemplifies the ways that Hollywood films promote the socio-economic structures that produce them, asserting that the film 'is shaped by and supportive of the economic, military and ideological power of the U.S. Empire'.<sup>128</sup> Frances Pheasant-Kelly and Anthony Peter Spanakos do not see *Iron Man* as so unequivocally supportive of U.S. structures, both arguing that the film, and others in the MCU, critiques the U.S. military-industrial complex.<sup>129</sup> Elsewhere, McSweeney outlines a sociological exchange of ideas between and within MCU films, arguing that perceptions of U.S. identity associated with World War II and 9/11 are examined in relation to each other in *The Avengers*.<sup>130</sup>

It is apparent from the above analysis that epistemological and sociological approaches form the basis of the different kinds of ideological critiques of superhero texts. These approaches can be deployed and combined in a range of ways, but typically lead to one of two conclusions: the texts are implicated in the perpetuation of false consciousness, or the texts are a site where different ideas are exchanged, thus reflecting social discourse. These approaches are so popular in discussions of the superhero genre

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<sup>127</sup> Jeanne Holland, 'It's Complicated: Spider-Man 2's Reinscription of "Good" and "Evil" in Post-9/11 America', *The Journal of American Culture*, 35:4 (December 2012), pp. 289-303. Holland's main argument is that '*Spider-Man 2* calls out the Bush Administration for demonizing of the other and appropriating the disaster for political ends' (p. 290).

<sup>128</sup> Tanner Mirrlees, 'How to Read *Iron Man*: The Economics, Geopolitics and Ideology of an Imperial Film Commodity', *Cineaction*, 92 (2013), p. 5.

<sup>129</sup> Frances Pheasant-Kelly, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 143-159; and Anthony Peter Spanakos, 'Exceptional Recognition: The U.S. Global Dilemma in *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man*, and *Avatar*' in Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou (ed.), *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Superhero* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), pp. 15-28. Pheasant-Kelly also provides analysis of *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), while Spanakos also provides analysis of *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008).

<sup>130</sup> McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film*, pp. 126-132. Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison similarly argue that interactions between superheroes in *The Avengers* enact the discursive exchange of ideas in post-9/11 U.S. culture, since 'each character represents a distinct identity or kind of behavior with which the United States has been struggling to reconcile itself while collectively representing the reactions of a nation to a direct, domestic attack'. Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, 'Fighting the Battles We Never Could: *The Avengers* and Post-September 11 American Political Identities', *P.S.: Political Science & Politics*, 47:1 (2014), p. 120. I will provide a detailed examination of what each superhero in *The Avengers* represents in chapter three.

that, as responses to the MCU films demonstrate, scholarly ideological critiques of superhero films are now often produced within a few years after a film's release.

In pursuit of fresh readings of the superhero genre I seek to look at not ideological, but stylistic and formal, continuities and exchanges between texts. Through identifying meanings that superhero texts' aesthetic strategies create, I will often comment on texts' sociopolitical resonances and affiliations. However, I will not evaluate ideological functions of superhero texts and situate myself within the already considerable body of scholarship that performs such critique. Rather, my aesthetic analysis of genre texts in different media draws from and contributes to the field of adaptation studies.

### Adaptation

Certain theories of adaptation provide useful tools for framing and examining aesthetic interactions between texts in different media with shared concerns. Literature on adaptation that focuses on issues of medium specificity explores the formal relations between media. Looking at this scholarship allows me to identify and interrogate evaluative arguments that inform perceptions of comics form and film form. Surveying scholarship that explores issues of medium specificity in relation to comics and film enables me to begin considering the media's formal properties in relation to each other. Poststructuralist theories of adaptation are also concerned with dialogue between texts and media. Conceptual models that poststructuralist theories of adaptation formulate to illuminate intertextual exchanges between a multitude of texts can be used to explore the dialogue occurring between texts in a superhero franchise, and in the superhero genre. The approaches to form and intertextuality offered by these areas of adaptation studies equip my study of the potential for aesthetic configurations found in superhero texts to be adapted between media.

### ***Binaries and Hierarchies***

In their studies of adaptation, Catherine Constable, Robert Stam and Kamilla Elliott recognise that long-established binaries in discussions of philosophy and the arts have influenced discourse on novel to

film adaptation.<sup>131</sup> Word/image is the central binary, which acts as a framework to contain other binaries, namely conceptual/perceptual and temporal/spatial. These binaries, like others that I will discuss, affix hierarchies of value onto forms and media.

Constable traces the word/image segregation back to Plato's discussion of visual arts in book X of the *Republic*. She outlines the way 'Plato sets up a tripartite distinction between the perfect world of Forms, which is defined as true and real, the physical world of phenomena, which is a copy of the Forms, and representational art'.<sup>132</sup> The Forms are immaterial and therefore not restricted by physical structures, while objects in the physical world are limited by their corporeality. As a copy of the physical world, mimetic art is twice removed from the truth and complexity of the Forms, 'a copy of a copy'.<sup>133</sup> Meanwhile, words do not mimetically replicate physical phenomena but instead conjure ideas and concepts, and thus are the means through which the Forms are conveyed. Stam also notes the Platonic roots of hostility against images, and outlines how 'iconophobia' is further perpetuated by 'the Judaic-Muslim-Protestant prohibitions of "graven images"... The *locus classicus* of this attitude is in the Second Commandment forbidding the making of idols in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below'.<sup>134</sup> These religious teachings brand visual representations of sacred phenomena or words as blasphemous. Although Platonic philosophy and Judaic-Muslim-Protestant teachings articulate the faults of images differently, they form significant roots of a pervasive discourse that presents images as crass approximations of the depth and complexity of words.

Elliott identifies Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* as a key work that facilitated the word/image binary's transition to discussions of novel to film

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<sup>131</sup> Catherine Constable, *Adapting Philosophy: Jean Baudrillard and the Matrix Trilogy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation', in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (ed.), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 1-52; and Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>132</sup> Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, p. 42.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>134</sup> Stam, 'Introduction', p. 5.

adaptation.<sup>135</sup> Through assertions such as ‘succession in time is the sphere of the poet, as space is that of the painter’, Lessing established oppositions between arts and forms that would be perpetuated and expanded by other theorists.<sup>136</sup> George Bluestone’s *Novels into Film*, the first attempt to construct a theory of adaptation, applies Lessing’s distinctions to novels and film.<sup>137</sup> Elliott explains that

Bluestone, unilaterally designated the father of novel and film studies, entitled the first chapter of his 1957 *Novels into Film* “The Limits of the Novel and the Limits of the Film,” after Lessing’s subtitle to his *Laocoön: An Essay upon The Limits of Painting and Poetry*. In this chapter, he follows Lessing’s categorizations of poetry and painting, designating the novel as conceptual, linguistic, discursive, symbolic, and inspiring mental imagery, with time as its formative principal, and the film as perceptual, visual, presentational, literal, and given to visual images, with space as its formative principle.<sup>138</sup>

Bluestone adopted Lessing’s distinctions to counter the preoccupation with fidelity (how faithful an adaptation is to its source material) in discourse on adaptation. Fidelity criticism implies that a novel’s content can be detached from its form and transferred to film, and that an adaptation’s duty is to recreate the novel as closely as possible, thus subjugating films to novels. However, the medium specific distinctions that Bluestone maintains, which suggest that faithful adaptation is impossible, similarly portray film as inferior. As words present concepts to be processed by internal mental processes, they can evoke thoughts, memories and dreams.<sup>139</sup> Conversely, images are perceived by the eye and thus operate in a more basic, materialistic realm, only inferring thought and representing it spatially.<sup>140</sup> While presenting film’s spatiality as limiting, Bluestone also sees film as restricted temporally: ‘the novel has three tenses; the film has only one’.<sup>141</sup> The conceptual and temporal properties of words/novels enable, while the perceptual and spatial properties of images/films restrict, content’s modes of expression.

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<sup>135</sup> Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, pp. 9-13; Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, ‘Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry’ (1766) trans. W.A. Streeb (repr. in J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *Classics and Romantic German Aesthetics* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), pp. 25-129).

<sup>136</sup> Lessing, ‘Laocoon’, p. 92.

<sup>137</sup> George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

<sup>138</sup> Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 11.

<sup>139</sup> Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

These logical oppositions persist in many subsequent theorisations of adaptation, including those that explore the potential for content to be transferred between forms. For example, Brian McFarlane separates a novel's narrative functions into two categories borrowed from Roland Barthes' studies of narratology: distributional functions and integrational functions.<sup>142</sup> Distributional functions are events and actions. As these are physical phenomena in the diegetic world of a novel, they can be directly transferred into the spatial medium of film. Integrational functions are less tangible phenomena such as 'psychological information relating to characters, data regarding their identity, notations of atmosphere and representations of place'.<sup>143</sup> These are conceptual and immaterial, and therefore require 'adaptation proper' to transition into a medium that relies on visual representation.<sup>144</sup> McFarlane thus deploys familiar binaries, in which words/novels are conceptual while images/films are perceptual, to determine whether content can be transferred between the media or requires adaptation.<sup>145</sup>

Amidst the large body of literature on novel to film adaptation that separates the media into words and images, Elliott's *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* is a rare examination of adaptation between two media that *both* feature words and images (illustrated Victorian novels and film). Elliott is therefore particularly instructive to my study. Elliott argues that transferring arguments pertaining to poetry and painting over to discussions of novel and film is insufficient and reductive. The presence of different types of illustrations in many Victorian novels, and numerous ways that words are deployed in film, means that 'the designation of novels as "words" and of films as "images" is neither empirically nor logically sustainable'.<sup>146</sup> I will return to Elliott later when exploring means of dismantling long-established binaries that persist in discussions of the arts. Before doing so, it is necessary to outline

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<sup>142</sup> Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>145</sup> McFarlane explicitly articulates the conceptual/perceptual binary when he asserts that 'the verbal sign, with its low iconicity and high symbolic function, works *conceptually*, whereas the cinematic sign, with its high iconicity and uncertain symbolic function, works directly, sensuously, *perceptually*.' *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27. Emphasis in original.

<sup>146</sup> Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 14.



ways that this binary logic and the hierarchies of value it imposes influence the cultural valuation of comics, and manifest in new ways in debates concerning comics to film adaptation.

Comics, like film, despite featuring both words and images, are typically deemed image-based media, and thus culturally devalued. Wertham's attack on comics in *Seduction of the Innocent* exemplifies the inflammatory extreme of this mode of thinking. Wertham dedicates a whole chapter, titled 'Retooling for Illiteracy: The Influence of Comic Books on Reading', to placing comics in hostile relations with the written word.<sup>147</sup> Wertham promotes literature as key to a child's intellectual and emotional development. He argues that 'there is a high correlation between intelligence, vocabulary and reading. Comic-book readers are handicapped in vocabulary building because in comics all the emphasis is on the visual image and not on the proper word'.<sup>148</sup> These claims fit into the tradition of discourse that claims images stimulate only the body, and not the brain's higher functions, a notion made explicit by Wertham's accusations of comics arousing youths sexually. Wertham adds that 'while comic books harm children in acquiring the basic skills of reading, they harm them even more on the higher level of learning to appreciate and like the content of good reading matter'.<sup>149</sup> This vilification of images expresses fear that shallow visual representations will replace people's desire for, and ability to comprehend, mentally invigorating words. Images appeal to the physical body and pervert the mind, rather than offering it nourishment.

Formal binaries combine with other factors, some of which I discussed earlier in relation to the evaluation of texts within a medium, to enforce hierarchies of media. Although comics and film are both typically considered image-based media, these other factors can draw them toward different points on the hierarchy. Will Brooker states that '[f]ilm may stand in a subordinate relationship to literature... but comic books are even lower down the ladder than movies'.<sup>150</sup> Luca Somigli argues that comics are perceived as inferior due to being situated as popular culture, while film has aspired to high

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<sup>147</sup> Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, pp. 119-145.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>150</sup> Will Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* (London: IB Tauris, 2012), p. 48.

art.<sup>151</sup> Somigli significantly outlines how the critical formulation of auteur theory sought to elevate film by aligning it with the culturally respectable novel.<sup>152</sup> As previously discussed, certain comics have also been championed as auteurist, while discourses of auteurism typically erect a binary between distinctive works of aesthetic value and homogenous mass-produced genre product. Thus, certain critical discourses can be deployed to raise particular comics and films toward the distinguished heights of novels.<sup>153</sup> Comics arguably have greater obstacles to surmount than film does when seeking to ascend the hierarchy. For example, the fact that comics are often seen as synonymous with the superhero genre means that genre's association with the mechanical reproduction of formula is often applied to the whole medium. The status of comics and film on a hierarchy of cultural value is therefore not fixed. Various criteria, such as association of specific texts with auteurs or genres, can raise texts higher or drag them lower on the hierarchy. The position held by groups of prominent texts can also affect their medium's status.

The tendency for observers to deem comics a lower art than film, despite the hierarchy's mutability, potentially impacts issues of fidelity in adaptation. While fidelity criticism in novel to film adaptation suggest that it is a film's duty to faithfully reproduce its source text, Somigli argues that the lower cultural status of comics means fidelity is not a concern in comics to film adaptation.<sup>154</sup> Conversely, Brooker argues that

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<sup>151</sup> Somigli, 'The Superhero with a Thousand Faces: Visual Narratives on Film and Paper', in Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal (ed.), *Play it Again Sam: Retakes on Remakes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 285-286.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>153</sup> Another significant strategy for aligning comics with novels is the formulation and continued use of the term 'graphic novel', which associates the media by name, although continues to emphasise the visual (graphic) qualities of comics. Since the 1980s, graphic novels and 'trade collections' of limited series or selections of issues from an ongoing series have been commonly sold alongside novels bookshops. The successful alignment of certain comics with novels is also evidenced by that fact that they have on occasion been nominated for, and even won, major book awards. A notable example is Mary M. Talbot (w) and Brian Talbot's (a) *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), which won the Costa Biography Award 2012. It should be noted that Mary M. Talbot's status as an academic, and the fact *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes* juxtaposes an account of her childhood against that of novelist James Joyce's daughter's, gives the comic cultural currency within the spheres of academia and discourse on twentieth century literature. While superhero comics rarely obtain comparable recognition, there are isolated exceptions. For instance, the cover of recent collected editions of *Watchmen* boasts its status as 'one of Time Magazine's 100 best novels'.

<sup>154</sup> Somigli, 'The Superhero with a Thousand Faces', p. 285.

[w]hile the comic book industry may be the poor cousin to cinema in terms of cultural status and economic returns, film producers know that comic fans have a voice and a power disproportionate to their number... the fans are respected, and courted, as a small but vocal pressure group.<sup>155</sup>

The particularly passionate configurations of fandom that superhero comics cultivate attribute great value to comics. There is much evidence of studios seeking these fans' validation for film adaptations, and the positive word of mouth fans can generate, through assertions of fidelity.<sup>156</sup> An oft-cited example is Warner Bros. tailoring a trailer of *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989) to allay fan fear that the casting of Michael Keaton as the eponymous superhero would lead to a comedic departure from the preferred tone of contemporary *Batman* comics.<sup>157</sup> This desire to meet fan demands for fidelity often affects the aesthetics of adaptations by manifesting in attempts to recreate comics' imagery. To assess the potential for film to recreate the style and form of comics, it is vital to explore formal relations between the media.

### ***Comics Form and Film Form***

There have been some significant scholarly examinations of points of differentiation and overlap in the aesthetics of comics and film. These explorations can be positioned on a continuum. At the one pole, in an approach that recalls Bluestone's, specificities of each medium are outlined and used to support an argument that fidelity to the source is impossible. Pascal Lefèvre exemplifies this approach in an essay provocatively titled 'Incompatible Visual Ontologies? The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images'.<sup>158</sup> Lefèvre identifies four problems obstructing the adaptation of comics to film. The first is that certain narrative content is better suited to different media.<sup>159</sup> The other three pertain directly to formal differences that play a significant role in determining the suitability of content. In comics 'panels are arranged on a page, panels are static drawings and a comic does not make noise or sound. Film is

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<sup>155</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. 56.

<sup>156</sup> For further discussion of the channels through which fans operate, which have multiplied and increased in visibility with the rise of digital media, and the various ways that film adaptations respond by exhibiting fidelity to comics sources, see Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, pp. 129-168.

<sup>157</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, pp. 162-163.

<sup>158</sup> Pascal Lefèvre, 'Incompatible Visual Ontologies?: The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images' in Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, Matthew P. McAllister, (ed.). *Film and Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), pp. 1-12.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

quite different. First, there is a screen frame, second, the film images are moving and photographic, third, film has a soundtrack'.<sup>160</sup> These distinctions effectively erect formal binaries between the media's visual and aural qualities.

At the opposite pole, scholars propose that affinities between comics and film create ideal circumstances for adaptation. Henry John Pratt takes this view, arguing 'that comics and film are intimately connected by certain specific traits of the media that comprise them... comics is more suited than any other media for adaptation into film'.<sup>161</sup> Pratt's key arguments are that comics and film 'both tend strongly toward the narrative; both employ largely mimetic, visual narration; both are prototypically gappy; and both control the percipient's attention to a similar degree and with similar techniques'.<sup>162</sup> These factors pertain to the kinds of visual narration found in comics and film. Both communicate narrative through showing, feature spatiotemporal gaps between panels and shots, and offer different perspectives on depicted events. The fact that Pratt reframes some of the visual elements considered by Lefèvre as enabling rather than obstructing adaptation suggests that formal binaries between comics and film are unstable.

As noted in my introduction, Burke performs the most extensive work that has been undertaken in exploring the aesthetic potential for adaptation between comics and film. While not subscribing to the structuralist view of comics and film being incompatible, Burke does acknowledge the specificities of each medium. He adopts McFarlane's notion of non-transferrable elements requiring 'adaptation proper' to be realized in different, but equivalent, forms.<sup>163</sup> This framework provides Burke with a means to explore how content can travel between the form of comics and film. He argues that comparisons between the two media's forms facilitate this process: 'many codes and conventions pass back and forth in the overlap that these graphic narrative mediums share'.<sup>164</sup> Burke's detailed

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>161</sup> Henry John Pratt, 'Making Comics into Film' in Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook (ed.), *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012), p. 147.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>163</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, p. 16.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

exploration is instructive when seeking to understand points of exchange between comics and film while appreciating their differences. Through situating Burke alongside other scholars in this debate, I will now sketch the parameters of formal binaries that recur in discourse on comics to film adaptation and make some initial steps in probing these binaries' instability. The three binaries I will discuss, influenced by Lefèvre's discussion, are page layout/film frame, drawn/photographic image and written/spoken words. These areas are fundamental points of discussion in literature on the topic, and will be explored in greater detail throughout my case studies.

Spatiotemporal properties are of central concern in the page layout/film frame binary. As illustrated earlier through discussion of McCloud, comics manage temporal flow through spatial construction. McCloud situates this quality of comics as the inverse of film: 'space does for comics what time does for film'.<sup>165</sup> Pratt explains this distinction:

Films are (partially) constituted by images that succeed each other in actual time but appear to the viewer in the same actual space. Comics are (partially) constituted by images that succeed each other in actual space but appear to the reader at the same actual time.<sup>166</sup>

Time is the agent of change and progression in film, while space is the agent of change and progression in comics. The secondary status of time in comics is also evidenced by the fact that, as outlined by Lefèvre,

[i]t is the readers who have to leaf through a comic and they can choose their own reading speed. They can linger on a panel, scan the complete plate, and return to panels or whole sequences at free will. A film, though, obliges the viewer to follow the rhythm of the sequences.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 7.

<sup>166</sup> Pratt, 'Making Comics into Film', p. 150.

<sup>167</sup> Lefèvre, 'Incompatible Visual Ontologies?', p. 5. Lefèvre does note that DVDs can offer the viewer a similar degree of temporal control, allowing them to skip back and forth between chapters (p. 286). Conversely, comics created for digital platforms may include elements such as animations that have an inherent temporality. For analysis of ways in which digital technologies such as DVDs effect the temporality of cinema, see Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2007). For a comparison of the different kinds of control offered to audiences by digital and print comics, see Jayms Nichols, 'Comics and Control: Leading the Reading', *Writing Visual Culture*, vol. 7, 2015.

Although comics imply temporal flow, a reader is free to progress at whatever pace they desire. The continuous temporal flow of film does not permit this freedom. It is interesting that, in discourse on adaptation, films are generally considered spatial in relation to novels, but temporal in relation to comics. Structural traits of media can therefore be assigned differently depending on the perspective from which they are viewed, while a medium such as film demonstrably has both spatial and temporal properties.

Even the discourse on comics and film that designates the former as spatial and the latter as temporal assigns spatiotemporal qualities to both media through the assertion that comics use space to manage time while film uses time to manage space. Thus, neither medium is solely spatial or solely temporal. Both forge complex relations between space and time. The presence of both temporal and spatial qualities in film means that, although its composition may be fundamentally different than comics, it can construct spatiotemporal configurations that recall those of comics. For example, Burke notes that films can hold moments in freeze frame, and identifies the prominence of the 'bullet-time' special effect, as pioneered by *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski (as The Wachowski Brothers), 1999), in comic book movies, arguing that this effect functions to emulate the stasis of comics panels.<sup>168</sup> In scenes presented in bullet-time, time is slowed to an almost-standstill for a few moments to emphasise, and allow viewers' eyes to wander over, a particularly expressive point in an action. However, while emulating the stillness of comics panels and briefly granting the viewer the freedom to scan an image, ultimately the film's flow determines when the action will be sped back up. The spatiotemporal properties of comics and film thus allow for comparable, but still distinct, strategies.

Although acknowledging distinctions between comics page layouts and film frames, Pratt ultimately sees the fact that both tell narratives through sequences of images presenting characters and environments from varying perspectives as reconciling the media.<sup>169</sup> Due to these similarities, he

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<sup>168</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, pp. 194-198.

<sup>169</sup> Pratt, 'Making Comics into Film', pp. 150-154.

proposes that comics can effectively act as storyboards for films.<sup>170</sup> Pratt provides the *Watchmen* film adaptation's (Zack Snyder, 2009) commitment to recreating panels and sequences from the comic as evidence for this argument.<sup>171</sup> However, as demonstrated earlier through discussion of formalist approaches to comics, formal configurations can convey meaning. Thus, if a film recreates a comic panel-for-shot, it might miss out on meanings embedded in the spatial juxtaposition of panels. In fact, the complex juxtapositional devices in the *Watchmen* comic are frequently used to demonstrate differences between comics page layouts and film frames. For instance, Pratt himself uses *Watchmen* as a counterexample that challenges his storyboard argument. One piece of evidence he provides is *Watchmen* #5, titled 'Fearful Symmetry', which famously 'consists of pages that are mirror images of each other in layout, color, overall design, and even narrative event: the last page mirrors the first, the second-to-last mirrors the second, and so on, until they meet in the middle'.<sup>172</sup> Elsewhere, Burke observes that

[i]n *Watchmen*, much of the tension in Rorschach's session with a psychoanalyst stems from the co-presence of comic panels, as the layout allows the reader to juxtapose the inkblots, Rorschach's anemic responses, and his violent memories. This effect is diminished in the film where one image replaces another.<sup>173</sup>

This notion of the spatiotemporal properties of comics and films creating different effects is vital. Unfortunately, Burke does not proceed to discuss what alternative effects the film creates, and the means through which these are created. Throughout my case studies I will pay particular attention to ways in which meanings and effects created through spatiotemporal devices in comics shift when films use different spatiotemporal devices to present similar characters and events.

Lefèvre designates drawn images as subjective and photographic images as objective:

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-155.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 161. In the same edited collection, Roy T. Cook also cites this issue when discussing differences between comics and film form. Roy T. Cook, 'Why Comics are not Films: Metacomics and Medium-Specific Conventions' in Meskin and Cook (ed.), *The Art of Comics*, p. 174; Alan Moore (w) and Dave Gibbons (a), 'Fearful Symmetry', *Watchmen* #5 (New York: DC Comics, January 1987).

<sup>173</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, p. 224.

The form of the drawing influences the manner the viewer will experience and interpret the drawing. A drawn image offers a specific view on reality and the creator's subjectivity of this reality is built into the work, and a fairly obvious part of this work... A photographic image has, by its optic nature alone, a quite different visual ontology. Viewers do not react in the same way to a drawing as to a photographic image. Although photos can also be manipulated by using special software such as Photoshop, generally the viewer still accords more realism to a photo than to a stylized drawing.<sup>174</sup>

Drawn images present their artist's specific perspective on the world, while photographic images represent reality itself. The association of photography with reality is rooted in established thinking that attributes the quality of indexicality to the photographic image, since the photographic process traditionally imprints an indexical representation of a real life referent on celluloid. André Bazin's oft-quoted assertion that '[t]he photographic image is the object itself' exemplifies this line of thinking, explicitly equating the photographic image with its physical referent, and thus indexicality with realism.<sup>175</sup> According to Lefèvre, the stylised qualities of drawn images and indexical qualities of photographic images cause audiences to comprehend them differently. Since audiences do not expect drawn images to be realistic, they are more likely to accept certain content, such as hyperbolic violence, when drawn rather than when presented in a photographic medium.<sup>176</sup> Perceived ontological distinctions between drawn and photographic images therefore suggest that certain content cannot easily transition from comics to film.

Interestingly, the logics that underpin the drawn/photographic image binary expose the instability of the binary that presents images as perceptual and words as conceptual. Following Lefèvre, drawn images do not represent physical objects, but rather abstract ideas and thoughts. As such, audiences need to conceptually process drawn images to fully understand them. The ability for images in comics to be stylised in ways that require different levels of perceptual and conceptual processing was outlined earlier through reference to McCloud's diagram that 'represents the total pictorial vocabulary

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<sup>174</sup> Lefèvre, 'Incompatible Visual Ontologies?', pp. 8-9.

<sup>175</sup> André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 14.

<sup>176</sup> Lefèvre, 'Incompatible Visual Ontologies?', p. 9.



of comics or of *any* of the visual arts' [Figure 7].<sup>177</sup> McCloud's initial delineation of words requiring conceptual mental decoding and images being optically perceived upholds the word/image binary.<sup>178</sup> However, by outlining how realistic and abstract qualities can be blended and balanced in images, McCloud provides tools for dismantling both the word/image and drawn/photographic image binaries. McCloud's discussion and diagram demonstrates that images and words, and realistic and stylised images, although held as oppositions, actually exist in a shared plane in which each can adopt qualities of the other.

McCloud's assertion that the range of pictorial vocabulary his diagram depicts is available to '*any* of the visual arts' suggests that no content is unavailable to each image type, so long as an appropriate style is chosen. Throughout my case studies, I will explore ways in which elements of superhero adaptations' visual content – including colour, spatial construction and performance – are stylised to realise the content of comics. In my second chapter, I will examine the kinds of image stylisation enabled by digital filmmaking technologies, particularly CGI. This analysis will explore the applications of CGI when adapting content from comics to film, paying particular attention to how uses of CGI negotiate potential restrictions on expressivity enforced by associations of the photographic image with realism.

The key distinctions typically outlined between written words in comics and spoken words in film are that the former are spatial, iconic and only imply tone of voice, while the latter are immaterial and delivered aurally with specific intonation. As discussed by Burke, written words take unique iconic forms in comics, suggesting intonation and creating the sense of a human voice through factors such as style of writing (typically handwritten), line thickness and shape of speech balloon.<sup>179</sup> Despite these variables making the form of written words in comics more expressive than words in, say, a novel,

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<sup>177</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 51. Emphasis in original.

<sup>178</sup> It needs to be noted that McCloud uses different terminology, categorising words as perceived information and images as received information. However, the qualities he attributes to these categories are the same as those assigned by the more common designation of words as conceptual and images as perceptual. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 49.

<sup>179</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, pp. 199-200.

where the font is typically uniformly formatted throughout, the reader must still imagine what the voice sounds like, unlike in film.<sup>180</sup> A parallel is evident between the written/spoken word and word/image binaries, as in each written words are processed by the brain, while the opposing element is perceived by a sensory organ, ear and eye respectively. Again, familiar criteria uphold a binary.

Lefèvre argues that the different forms dialogue takes in comics and film again determine content:

[t]he texts in speech balloons are generally not suited for film dialogue and they need some rewriting. Superhero comics, for example, often use very stylistic and bombastic dialogue; a literal screen translation may emphasize such dialogue's artificial nature to the point of unintentional camp.<sup>181</sup>

As with the opposition between drawn and photographic images, the issue is one of stylisation. Dialogue that seems more natural and realistic is purportedly required when actors utter words that audiences hear aurally, the same way that voices are heard in real life. However, the ability for actors to alter their intonation is effectively a kind of vocal stylisation. Rather than choosing an iconic form for words that suggests intonation in a particular way, as comics do, film actors choose a specific vocal register. In my first chapter, I will explore strategies used to transfer famous lines of dialogue from superhero texts between written and spoken words in different media. These strategies include exchanging lines between different voices and characters, which can alter the impact of the lines.

The spatial properties of written words in comics also enable specific functions that arguably cannot be adapted into film. For example, Roy T. Cook analyses 'metacomics' that reflect on the medium, specifically ones that prompt readers to consider the physical form of speech and thought balloons.<sup>182</sup> Cook discusses a character in *Bomb Queen* who can edit speech balloons, and one in *The Filth* who can project his thought balloons for other characters to see.<sup>183</sup> By breaking the convention in which the

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<sup>180</sup> Lefèvre discusses this opposition. Lefèvre, 'Incompatible Visual Ontologies?', p. 11.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 11. The idea of comic book dialogue sounding camp when spoken by live actors is a key feature of television series *Batman* (ABC, 1966-1968), which peppers its dialogue with the kind of bombastic language and heavy use of alliteration common in contemporary comic books.

<sup>182</sup> Cook, 'Why Comics are not Films'.

<sup>183</sup> Jimmie Robinson, *Bomb Queen Volumes 1-5* (Chicago: Image Comics, February 2006- March 2009); Grant Morrison (w), Chris Weston (p), Gary Erskine (i), et al. *The Filth* #1-13 (New York: DC Comics, August 2002-October 2003).

physical form of speech and thought in comics does not exist in diegesis, these comics force readers to 'reevaluate the conventional aspects of comics and how those conventions shape our ideas of what comics are and what they can do'.<sup>184</sup> Cook argues that this reflexive effect caused by the conventional features of comics dialogue suddenly being used in an unconventional way could not be recreated in film; since spoken dialogue does not have any physical properties, speech balloons are intrinsically unnatural and disruptive in film.<sup>185</sup> Although speech balloons do feature in some films, 'they are already a non-standard feature, typically functioning as an explicit reference to comics'.<sup>186</sup> The comics that will be discussed in this thesis would largely not be considered 'metacomics' in the sense that Cook uses. However, throughout my analysis I will outline specific meanings that spatial properties of words in comics can evoke, and consider strategies through which comparable meanings are recreated in film.

While the different forms words take in comics and film obstructs the transference of certain meanings, it is important to acknowledge that written words in various forms can be naturalised within film. Burke argues that comics captions/balloons and film intertitles developed in dialogue with one another, demonstrates that intertitles use iconic elements, and notes that early silent cartoons used speech balloons.<sup>187</sup> Once more, issues of style affect the degree to which traits of comics can be shared

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<sup>184</sup> Cook, 'Why Comics are not Films', p. 182.

<sup>185</sup> When discussing how many of the codes of comics are rooted in real life referents, Burke cites the connection Eisner draws between speech balloons and 'steam from warm air expelled during conversation' (Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 26) to suggest that words in reality do have physical properties (Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, p. 215). However, the steam is not solid, and has no iconic correspondence to the specific words being spoken.

<sup>186</sup> Cook, 'Why Comics are not Films', p. 182. Cook provides *American Splendor* (Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003) as an example. An early example of speech balloons being featured in a live-action film occurs in *Who Would Kill Jessie?* (Václav Vorlíček, 1966), in which characters from a comic are brought out of the protagonist, Jindrich Beránek's (Jirí Sovák), dreams and into the physical world. When the comic's characters are transported into the physical world of the diegesis they are portrayed by live actors and, despite their odd behaviour and some special powers, are mostly like other characters. The central difference is that, rather than speaking, their mouths emit speech balloons. This device supports that notion that a key element separating comics and film is the written and spoken word opposition. The other characters' surprised reactions to these balloons draws attention to their strangeness. The two-dimensionality of these balloons further outlines their incongruous situation within cinematic space. For instance, when Jessie (Olga Schoberová), one of the comic's characters, is in court, the judge requests that one of the guards turn around her flat speech balloon so that the stenographer can see her dialogue. It should be noted that, interestingly, the speech balloons in *Who Would Kill Jessie?* do also have sonic qualities; an airy chime always accompanies their appearance.

<sup>187</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, pp. 200-201.

by film; written words with iconic properties are naturalised in the aesthetics of silent and animated cinema. Although film audiences expect dialogue to be delivered aurally since the introduction of synchronised sound, words can still have more naturalistic iconic properties if presented in particular ways. An example Burke provides are subtitles that translate non-English dialogue in *Kick-Ass 2* (Jeff Wadlow, 2013) being presented as speech balloons.<sup>188</sup> While these speech balloons are still to some degree obtrusive, their combination with the familiar device of the subtitle aids their naturalisation. Regardless of style, there are other ways in which written words are naturalised in both comics and film. Written words that are not featured in the diegesis can overlay the image, such as information pertaining to locations, while writing can be part of the diegetic world, examples of which include road signs and correspondence.

The above interrogation of purported formal binaries separating comics and film exposes the instability of these binaries, while also demonstrating that certain ontological differences between the media prevent a simple transference of content. Conceptual/perceptual and temporal/spatial divisions that uphold the word/image binary recur at the foundations of formal binaries used to separate comics and film. The contradictory ways that these criteria are applied to media by different binaries suggests that, rather than maintaining oppositions, both sides can be at play at once in forms and media. Visual and aural elements and the means through which they are presented in comics and film are both conceptual and perceptual, temporal and spatial. These shared qualities of comics and film facilitate the adaptation of content, while the qualities' unique configurations in each media generate shifts in meaning and effect. While Burke is useful for examining formal relations between comics and film, he is primarily concerned with 'cinematic efforts to grasp the language of comics'.<sup>189</sup> He does note changes that these efforts produce, but these observations typically pertain to style and form, rather than probing the ways that such shifts may implement alternations in content. Burke's main observation on how the specificities of style and form in comic book movies impact content is that

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

they create a sense of heightened reality.<sup>190</sup> I seek to explore whether exchanges between comics' and film's aesthetic configurations create far more specific meanings and effects, and modify the superhero genre's conventions. Elliott formulates a useful theoretical framework for understanding how conceptual/perceptual and temporal/spatial qualities interact in different kinds of words and images, and alternations in content this dialogue can engender. Approaches to adaptation that explicitly employ poststructuralist theory provide further tools for appreciating dialogue between media and texts.

### ***Intermedial and Intertextual Dialogue***

Debates regarding the relationship between form and content are engrained into discourses on medium specificity. Scholars such as Bluestone and Lefèvre, who argue that irreconcilable formal properties prevent faithful adaptation between media, bind form and content. Scholars such as Pratt, who identify points of affinity between media, suggest that content can flow unimpeded between comparable forms. Elliott intervenes in this debate and offers a fresh perspective.

Elliott dismantles the logic underpinning the word/image binary by explaining that 'in illustrated novels and worded films, pictures can operate according to the features and functions traditionally assigned to words, and words can function according to the features and functions conventionally assigned to pictures'.<sup>191</sup> For example, Elliott demonstrates that illustrations in books and intertitles in silent films can have comparable temporal functions. The fact that illustrations in novels and intertitles in film are both frequently criticised for disrupting narrative progression reveals that both can freeze temporal flow.<sup>192</sup> Conversely, certain images in novels and intertitles in silent films function as agents of

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<sup>190</sup> This notion of 'heightened reality' runs through Burke's discussion of aesthetics, and is one of the key conventions he formulates for the 'comic book movie' genre: '[t]he comic book movie genre follows a vigilante or outsider character engaged in a form of revenge narrative, and is pitched at a heightened reality with a visual style marked by distinctly comic book imagery'. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>191</sup> Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 16.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. Elliott explains: '[i]llustrations appear as frozen moments in novels, while verbal intertitles emerge as frozen moments in films. Thus, words and pictures change temporal places. Indeed, the kinship between book illustrations and film intertitles is readily apparent in the widespread critical and reviewer rhetoric that makes book illustrations "distractions" from the prose and film intertitles "interruptions" from the scenes.'

progression. To illuminate ways in which images in novels can propel the narrative, Elliott analyses vignettes from *Vanity Fair*<sup>193</sup>:

[i]nterspersed between lines of moving prose, they at times seem to leap out from that movement, carrying with them both the mobility of the prose and their own mobile pictorial leap from it, freezing momentarily before diving into the prose stream again. But even this freezing does not constitute total stasis, for the mobile lines and vigorous strokes of vignettes suggest captured motion rather than stop-action.<sup>194</sup>

The actions depicted, which are often movements, and their illustrative style, cause vignettes to share the same temporal thrust as the prose. Similarly, as silent films evolved, 'new editing patterns emerged, patterns that wove intertitles and filmed scenes into hybrid verbal-visual "sentences". These sentences were governed by verbal syntax, not by visual editing rhythms'.<sup>195</sup> For instance, intertitles would form incomplete sentences and end with an ellipsis, the proceeding shot would act as a clause, and a second intertitle would close off the sentence. Thus, montage can be enacted through relays between words and images, which both drive the narrative forward and flow into each other.

The opening page from a *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* story in *Flash* #219 reveals some of the tools comics offer to facilitate unique interactions between the spatiotemporal functions of words and images.<sup>196</sup> A car skids toward Black Canary in three panels along the top row, and collides with her in a larger image that takes up the rest of the page [Figure 9]. Bold, capitalised onomatopoeia that coils from behind panels and characters to in front of them like a reel of tape represents both the car's screeching brakes and haphazard course. As the string of letters crosses from the first panel into the second, its functions multiply, the letters appearing to both swerve behind Black Canary's head and represent a scream emitting from her mouth. The letters' iconic configuration also signifies volume and temporality. They get bigger as they progress down the page, indicating that the breaks rapidly

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<sup>193</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1848; repr. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994).

<sup>194</sup> Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 19.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>196</sup> Denny O'Neil (w), Neal Adams (a) and Cory Adams (c), 'The Fate of an Archer', *Flash* #219 (January 1973) (repr. in Robert Greenberger (ed.), *Green Lantern/Green Arrow Volume Two* (New York: DC Comics, 2004), pp. 174-183).

get louder and Black Canary's scream intensifies as the car gets closer with each elapsing moment. Words thus temporally and spatially map both aural and physical phenomena. The images work with the words to convey the scene's spatiotemporal arrangement. While each panel uses distance and perspective to show how far the car is from Black Canary, motion lines indicates the vehicle's speed. These iconic signifiers that imbue the still images with motion and temporality are akin to the 'mobile lines and vigorous strokes' that Elliott observes in vignettes from *Vanity Fair*. Word and image collaborate to mark the final panel as the climax. The size of the red letters spelling 'SKASH' and image of the crash dwarf the other words and images on the page, while spilling out into the previous panels. This spatial dominance, and the fact that the coil of letters that has been guiding the reader through the action now terminates, underscores the moment as the scene's gruesome endpoint.



Figure 9 Words and images perform a range of spatiotemporal functions on the opening page of 'The Fate of an Archer' in Flash #219



This example of words and images performing the functions traditionally assigned to each other recalls McCloud's discussion of words having a spatial, and images a temporal, function in comics, while both can be conceptual and perceptual depending on how they are stylised. Elliott uses the demonstrable dialogue and sharing of functions between forms within media to construct the foundations of a theoretical model for observing exchanges between forms in different media as content is adapted from one to the other. Elliott proposes the analogy of a looking glass, in which each medium and text acts as a mirror that, while able to reflect other media and texts, will necessarily perform inversions that alter the content.<sup>197</sup> The looking glass allusion stems from Elliott's study of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*.<sup>198</sup> In *Through the Looking Glass*, a looking glass leads to a fantastical world that is constantly inverting reality. Furthermore, the books play with the temporal and spatial features of words and images, swapping their traditional functions and calling attention to their form. In so doing the form becomes the content, while simultaneously narrative content shapes form.

The mouse's tail/tale in *Alice* exemplifies these exchanges. The pun on tail/tale is evoked by the image of the tail being constructed from the words telling the tale [Figure 10], which Elliott analyses as follows:

The tail *is* a tale and the tale *is* a tail, pressing the two toward union. The words are the picture and the picture is the words. In a parody of the dogma that makes form and content indivisible, the tail as form is one with the tale as content. However, the tail as form holds the tale as content even as the tale forms the tail, so that one cannot confidently determine which is the form and which is the content in the union. As in facing looking glasses, the tale forms the tail which forms the tail which forms the tale endlessly, turning form and content relations topsy-turvy, *ad infinitum*.<sup>199</sup>

Elliott's analysis is purposely difficult to articulate, with the repetition and constant switching between tail and tale, and form and content, subverting attempts to form fixed relationships between signifier

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<sup>197</sup> For Elliott's full discussion of the looking glass analogical model for adaptation see *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, pp. 209-241.

<sup>198</sup> Lewis Carroll (w) and John Tenniel (a), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (London: Macmillan, 1865 and 1872; repr. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2001).

<sup>199</sup> Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 227. Emphasis in original.

and signified. This confusion illustrates that, through the application of looking glass logic, word and image and form and content are revealed to be inverted reflections of each other. Form and content each inform, but neither wholly determines, the other.

“Fury said to  
a mouse, That  
he met in the  
house, ‘Let  
us both go  
to law: *I*  
will prose-  
cute *you*.—  
Come, I’ll  
take no de-  
nial: We  
must have  
the trial;  
For really  
this morn-  
ing I’ve  
nothing  
to do.’  
Said the  
mouse to  
the cur.  
‘Such a  
trial, dear  
Sir. With  
no jury  
or judge,  
would  
be wast-  
ing our  
breath.’  
‘I’ll be  
judge.  
I’ll be  
jury,’  
said  
cun-  
ning  
old  
Fury:  
‘I’ll  
try  
the  
whole  
cause,  
and  
con-  
demn  
you to  
death.’”

Figure 10 The Mouse's tail/tale in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Elliott argues that words and images are cognitively drawn together through figuration. Words often prompt audiences to mentally conjure images, as suggested by the phrase “figure of speech”, which

'points to the graphic visualizations a word or phrase raises'.<sup>200</sup> Similarly, but less frequently acknowledged, 'certain pictures inspire verbal thinking'.<sup>201</sup> Through this cognitive processing, words and images both take on figurative form. Elliott explains that

[f]iguration not only bridges word and image divides, it also opens a space between form and content bonds. Visualizing a figure of speech pulls a reader/auditor out of binary semantic matchings of signifiers and signifieds into a third space that is neither signifier or signified at the same time that it is both.<sup>202</sup>

This situation of words and images in a space where they are both signifier and signified is demonstrated by the mouse's tale/tail, in which the words figuratively signify the image and the image figuratively signifies the words.

To demonstrate the applications of the looking glass analogy to adaptation, Elliott explores ways in which Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson and Hamilton Luske, 1951), creates puns that reflect the novel's interplay between words and images, and form and content, through devices that harness cinematic properties like sound and moving images.<sup>203</sup> These formal qualities of film that novels do not have can affect figuration. For example, the written description of the bread and butterfly in *Through the Looking Glass* prompts the mental image of a butterfly constructed from bread and butter, while the illustration of a single bread and butterfly gestures to the play on words. Disney's *Alice* uses film's capacity to present movement to modify the image's gesture to the verbal pun: a swarm of bread and butterflies 'fly together to form a loaf'.<sup>204</sup> Different forms and media can therefore evoke comparable figurative content, but changing the forms will reshape the figures. The shape that figures take is influenced by the form that signifies them, while the figures respond by signifying specifically inflected forms. The looking glass analogy thus 'yokes the pictorial and the verbal in cognition without erasing all differentiations between them and opens a

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., pp. 224-232.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

space between form and content that nevertheless maintains their bond'.<sup>205</sup> Differences between forms are acknowledged, while the ways these forms shape, and are shaped by, content, are illuminated, revealing dynamic interconnectivity between form and content.

Observing ways that different forms inflect figuration enables us to appreciate alterations that content undergoes when adapted between media that use related, but not identical, forms. Elliott's notion of reciprocal metamorphosis occurring in the exchanges between source text and adaptations provides an instructive way to frame transformations that the adaptation process engenders:

Looking glass figures point to a reciprocally transformative model of adaptation, in which the film is not translation or copy, but rather metamorphoses the novel and is, in turn, metamorphosed by it. Adaptation under such a model is neither translation nor interpretation, neither incarnation nor deconstruction: rather it is mutual and reciprocal inverse transformation that nevertheless restores neither to its original place.<sup>206</sup>

An adaptation does not either reproduce the source or create something new. Instead, content is enlisted in a process of metamorphosis as it is exchanged between two integrally joined texts, each with different but intersecting formal configurations. Perceiving source and adaptation as conjoined in this way also dismantles evaluative hierarchies that situate one medium as subservient to another. Elliott's useful language of metamorphosis will be deployed throughout this thesis.

The tendency of superheroes to pass between creative teams, media and incarnations over the course of decades provides particularly complex examples of content transforming through intertextual dialogue. Elliott provides useful models and vocabulary for examining this dialogue, but primarily uses these to interrogate relations between texts on a one-to-one basis, looking at mutual metamorphosis occurring between one book and one film. While Elliott harnesses poststructuralist modes of thinking to dismantle structural divisions between texts, scholarship that explicitly applies poststructural theory to adaptation can illuminate the myriad routes along which intertextuality occurs as superhero films adapt a vast network of texts.

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

Stam outlines applications that poststructuralist theory can offer adaptation studies. Poststructural thinking dethrones the figure of the author and challenges divisions of 'original' and 'copy' by instead arguing that *all* texts are formed through intertextual dialogue with previous works.<sup>207</sup> While Elliott dismantles media hierarches based on formal features, poststructuralist theory offers a means to dislodge notions of authorial authority and originality that typically grant source texts superiority in fidelity criticism. Poststructuralism also illuminates how texts are not just forged through interactions with other texts, but also through interactions with their sociopolitical surroundings:

Since adaptations engage the discursive energies of their time, they become a barometer of the ideological trends circulating during the moment of production. Each re-creation of a novel for the cinema unmask facets not only of the novel and its period and culture of origin, but also of the time and culture of the adaptation.<sup>208</sup>

This thinking again discredits authorial authority, as even an adapted novel is not the work of an individual, but rather produced through conversation with contemporary cultural and sociopolitical phenomena. The textual and sociopolitical dialogue in which adaptations partake occurs along multiple temporal trajectories, interacting with and intermingling the climates in which the adaptation and its intertexts were produced. Applying poststructuralist theory to adaptation thus illuminates an endless textual network, free from hierarchical distinctions, that any text coming into being traverses, accumulating and combining elements from other texts while engaging with sociopolitical discourse.

Ongoing intertextual dialogue is plainly observable in superhero franchises. Brooker, who in *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* applies poststructuralist theory to a study of *Batman* film adaptations, situates the films' adaptive process as a continuation of the intertextual exchanges inherent to superhero texts. Thus, although deploying a theoretical framework that debunks fidelity criticism, Brooker notes:

in a sense this unusual process of adaptation is extremely faithful to the comics; not to any individual title or story, but to the way comic book narratives work. *Batman Begins* takes

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<sup>207</sup> Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation' in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (ed.), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 8-9.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

familiar elements and rearranges them in a novel way, just as Miller did in *Dark Knight Returns*, as Morrison did in *Arkham Asylum*, and [Jeph] Loeb and [Tim] Sale did in *Long Halloween*... Even the first ever Batman story was itself a clever compilation and reordering of existing tropes from the pulps, the cinema and *Superman*.<sup>209</sup>

Each new incarnation of a superhero effectively reconfigures and transforms previous incarnations. By gesturing to the first *Batman* story's rearrangement of elements from pulp magazines, films and *Superman*, Brooker dismantles the notion of an original text that initiates the intertextual relay. Brooker's poststructural framework enables him to appreciate dialogue that *Batman* texts undertake with texts outside of the franchise, both elsewhere in the superhero genre and beyond the genre's parameters. Intertextuality between different superhero franchises, and ways in which tropes of superhero films develop through these exchanges, will be of concern to this project from the second chapter onwards. However, to appreciate the complex workings of cinematic superhero adaptations, it is vital to examine ways in which form and content develop through exchanges between various incarnations of the same superhero. Brooker provides useful analytical models for appreciating and examining the textual configurations and connections found in a single superhero's textual network.

Brooker discusses three frameworks that can be applied to the network of *Batman* texts; *myth*, *matrix* and *continuity canon*.<sup>210</sup> These get progressively narrower and more restrictive. Brooker's perception of Batman as myth refers to the character's metatextual existence, which incorporates not only every single *Batman* text ever produced, but also any audience interpretation. This framework fully encapsulates the boundless textual and cultural dialogue that poststructuralism envisions: 'Batman belongs to everyone; to the public, to popular memory, to a modern folk culture'.<sup>211</sup> As myth, Batman has no fixed shape, and can encompass conflicting representations and anything audiences want him to be.<sup>212</sup> In the model of a matrix, meaning begins to be corporately locked down. Brooker likens the matrix to a brand. The company that owns the brand (in the case of *Batman*, currently Warner Bros.,

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<sup>209</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-155.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>212</sup> It should be noted that Brooker's perception of superheroes functioning as myth here is markedly different to Eco's. Brooker presents myth as fluid, while Eco sees myth as static.

the parent company of DC) promotes a finite set of texts that determine its traits and boundaries. These texts need not be set in the same diegesis, but can 'overlap, intersect and borrow from each other'.<sup>213</sup> The selective matrix of 'approved' texts will typically share certain traits that erect a limited sphere of variance for Batman. The framework of a continuity canon curtails the large, but ultimately finite, amount of texts featuring Batman into a small set that present an officially sanctioned continuity. These texts tell a single, coherent narrative that erases contradictions by asserting 'what is true' and what isn't'.<sup>214</sup> The continuity canon sets Batman in a rigid and linear mould.

Despite the restrictions that the second and third frameworks endeavour to place on Batman, Brooker applies poststructuralist thinking to these models to reveal ways in which superhero texts refuse to have their fluid intertextuality confined. Brooker exposes the instability of binaries that seek to dispel "bad" texts from the *Batman* matrix. The most pervasive binary is camp/dark, which are 'the key terms in the opposition [that] have structured Batman's meanings for decades'.<sup>215</sup> This division is imposed by both Warner Bros./DC and fans. Texts that take a humorous and even parodic approach are branded camp aberrations. Gritty and sincere incarnations of *Batman* are welcomed into a matrix of dark texts. By surveying discourse that celebrates dark incarnations, Brooker finds that the darkness is constructed through being contrasted with lighter, camper, texts. Thus, such discourse functions to 'bring to light the very meanings it is trying to wipe out'.<sup>216</sup> Efforts to situate "good" texts in the matrix do not dispel "bad" texts, but actually illuminate their presence, suggesting that no text is ever fully banished from the matrix. Meanwhile, the selection of 'approved' texts that comprise Batman's matrix or continuity canon are liable to change. The malleability of continuity is evident in the fact that single lines of dialogue can expel, or reinstate, multiple stories from Batman's history.<sup>217</sup> For example, Brooker discusses how the identified murderer of Bruce Wayne's parents, Joe Chill, was erased from

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<sup>213</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. 153.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

continuity in the *Zero Hour* crossover event (a storyline that impacts multiple series in a publisher's fictional universe), only to be brought back in the *Infinite Crisis* crossover event.<sup>218</sup> This phenomenon is so common in comic book continuity that it has been popularly termed 'retcon', meaning the application of retroactive continuity to revise pre-established diegetic elements.<sup>219</sup>

The model of a matrix is of particular use to me when deployed in the dynamic way Brooker uses it. As past texts cannot be expunged from the matrix, Brooker argues the *Batman* matrix includes every text that has ever been produced about the character: 'all Batman texts enter a matrix of cross-platform product, and operate in a dialogue between the other current incarnations, and all previous versions'.<sup>220</sup> The model of a matrix thus provides a framework through which to observe dialogue between *all* different textual incarnations of a superhero from any time and in any medium. While Brooker's conceptualisation of myth is even broader, the textual focus of the matrix model facilitates the examination of intertextual and intermedial transformation that I seek to undertake.

Another particularly useful analytical model Brooker provides is a spectrum, which offers a means of placing different incarnations of a character in relation to one another within the matrix. Brooker derives this model from Duncan Falconer's conceptualisation of the 'Prismatic Age' of comics.<sup>221</sup> Falconer argues that the Prismatic Age started in mid-to-late 1990s superhero comic books. The prism analogy offers a potent image of light being refracted into all of the colours on the spectrum, and through doing so 'captures the sense of alternates, analogues and parallel iterations of characters that

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p. 159. The crossover event as narrative formation is defined and discussed in more detail in chapter three. Details of the main limited series (a series intended to be restricted to a finite number of issues) for *Zero Hour* and *Infinite Crisis* are as follows: Dan Jurgens (w & p), Jerry Ordway (i) and Gregory Wright (c), *Zero Hour* #4-0 (New York, DC Comics, September 1994) (issues released in reverse order); and Geoff Johns (w), Phil Jimenez (p), George Pérez (p), et al., *Infinite Crisis* #1-7 (New York: DC Comics, December 2005-June 2006).

<sup>219</sup> While the term 'retcon' is also used to describe the same narrative strategy in other media, it is particularly prominent in discourse surrounding superhero comic books, since retconning has been a recurrent phenomenon throughout their history. For an expanded definition see M. Keith Booker, 'Retcon', in M. Keith Booker (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010), p. 510.

<sup>220</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. 219.

<sup>221</sup> Duncan Falconer, 'A Hall of Mirrors II: The Prismatic Age', *Mindless Ones*, (2008), <<http://mindlessones.com/2008/08/03/a-hall-of-mirrors-ii-prismatic-age/>>, accessed on 10 August 2015.



frequently recurred in these stories'.<sup>222</sup> As a superhero is refracted through a prism, the full range of their possible roles is projected outward. Light and dark are no longer binaries, but instead different points on a spectrum that includes all the different shades between these points, and illuminates ways in which these shades blend into one another. The prism analogy thus dismantles binaries by creating a scale of tonal variations.

Brooker demonstrates the use of the spectrum model by using it to dismantle a commonly perceived binary in the superhero genre: superhero and supervillain. Applying the model to a reading of Batman and Joker, Brooker reveals that 'the relationship between Batman and Joker is not so much an opposition as a spectrum; they do not occupy opposite sides, but different points on the rainbow of light thrown by a prism'.<sup>223</sup> Some of the examples Brooker provides use formal devices to communicate the interlacing of Batman and Joker. For example, laughter, particularly the repeated motif of 'HA HA HA HA...' in bold font is Joker's trademark. At the end of *The Killing Joke* (1988), 'both Batman and Joker – caught in a struggle or an embrace, or both – seem ambiguously to be sharing the HA HA HA that crowds and invades the frame, white text around their silhouettes'.<sup>224</sup> The lack of specific intonation in written words ensures that the reader cannot tell which character is laughing, and thus could construe that Batman is capable of the hysterical madness typically attributed to Joker. While Brooker identifies formal devices through which a spectrum is articulated in individual texts, in this thesis I will use the spectrum model to explore ways in which characters shift as they are reflected between the aesthetic configurations of different texts and media.

Combining Brooker's theoretical concepts with those of Elliott equips me to examine the aesthetic qualities of textual dialogue as superhero texts are adapted between media. Brooker's model of a matrix illuminates the formation of a superhero franchise's intertextual network. Each new incarnation draws from, and inserts itself into, this matrix. The spectrum provides a means for exploring relations

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<sup>222</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. 165.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175; Alan Moore (w) and Brian Bolland (a), *Batman: The Killing Joke: The Deluxe Edition* (London: Titan Books, 2008).

between different incarnations of characters within a matrix. These models can therefore be used to map variations on both a superhero's and the superhero genre's traits, while revealing the non-linear intertextual relations that shape these variations. Although Brooker's models can accommodate observation of formal interactions between genetically linked texts and different media, he generally does not use them to look at form. Brooker discounts such an approach by suggesting that any visual links between *Batman* comics and *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) are either inconsequential quotations, or constructed by paratexts.<sup>225</sup> However, as explored by Burke, comic book adaptations do not just gesture to their source on the basic level of recreating imagery, but also seek ways to translate comics' stylistic and formal codes into film. Elliott's looking glass analogy provides tools to examine the metamorphosis that occurs as aesthetic strategies and content are reflected between comparable, but not identical, formal configurations. Interlinking the models provided by Brooker and Elliott facilitates the exploration of aesthetic interactions between an array of intersecting texts in different media. Through utilising these theoretical concepts, I will perform a transmedial examination of aesthetic qualities commonly overlooked in superhero texts, investigating how these are implicated in the text to text rearrangement of superhero conventions. The following chapters explore the meanings that stylistic and formal configurations convey in superhero texts, ways in which these shift across media, and the significance of these transformations.

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<sup>225</sup> See Brooker's discussion of *Batman Begins*' adaptive process. Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, pp. 48-74.

## Chapter One – Truth, Justice and the Cinematic Way: The First Superhero Blockbuster

*Superman: The Movie* sought to launch *Superman*, and by extension the superhero genre, into blockbuster cinema. By the time of the film's release, *Superman* texts had been in production for forty years in a range of media. The film thus had an expansive matrix of texts to adapt. The motifs and strategies that the film develops are formed through reflecting elements from this matrix into a model of blockbuster filmmaking emerging in the 1970s. This chapter explores the nature of this metamorphosis. The chapter's general trajectory proceeds outward from mapping the *Superman* matrix in its first forty years to analysing ways in which *Superman: The Movie* interacts with this matrix, then placing the film in wider cinematic contexts of 1970s Hollywood.

I firstly survey *Superman* texts in various media in the four decades following the first comic book adventure. This section demonstrates the use of the analytical models established in my review of literature for examining the ways in which a superhero develops as they pass between texts and media. This exploration is undertaken in two parts: an analysis of key tropes and motifs that are conveyed through images, words and sounds, and a discussion of the spectrum of possible roles the Clark and Superman identities adopt. The first utilises Elliot's analytical tools to investigate ways in which a superhero's identifying motifs develop and transform as they are reflected between forms and media in a textual matrix. The second utilises these tools to examine formal strategies through which the Clark and Superman identities are positioned in relation to each other. I also look at other factors, such as format and sociopolitical context, that influence the characterisation of the identities. Through undertaking this analysis, I outline the defining features and breadth of the matrix of intertexts available to *Superman: The Movie*.

I proceed to explore how *Superman: The Movie* positioned itself in relation to other *Superman* texts, media and cinematic contexts. I begin my analysis of the film by examining strategies through which it positions Clark and Superman on their spectrum of possible roles. This analysis enables me to establish how the film announces its relations to other *Superman* texts, while simultaneously communicating its

distinguishing features. The next two sections identify stylistic motifs deployed throughout the film that gesture to comics while metamorphosing traits from the *Superman* matrix through distinctly cinematic means. This exploration continues my review of literature's comparison of comics form and film form by identifying ways in which the film itself asserts differences between the two media. These first three sections exhibit a progression from ways in which the film situates itself alongside previous incarnations of *Superman* and the medium of comics, to ways in which the film harnesses and showcases its cinematic properties. Finally, I situate *Superman: The Movie* in broader cinematic contexts to explore the film's role in key narrative, economic and industrial shifts that were occurring in Hollywood in the late 1970s, and continue to resonate today. This section includes analysis of ways in which the film deploys conventions of other cinematic genres to establish the superhero genre in blockbuster form, and considers how these other genre conventions affect *Superman's* familiar traits.

### Superman's Early Intertexts

Before soaring to new cinematic heights, *Superman* had found great success in many media. Tracing Superman's key incarnations, Larry Tye states:

Every era of Superman had a defining medium. In the late 1930s and early 1940s it was comic books and comic strips that introduced the character and generated the buzz. Radio made a splash in the 1940's, with cartoons and serials building the wave. George Reeves and his TV adventures were the centre of gravity from the beginning to the end of the 1950s .... [in the 1960s] the big thing, again, was comics.<sup>226</sup>

Similarly, Richard Berger observes that 'Superman's seventy-year history shows us that comic books were the central texts in the 1930s and 1940s, followed by the 1950s George Reeves television serials, before the late 1970s and 1980s Christopher Reeve films rewired the entire Superman canon'.<sup>227</sup> Like Tye, Berger historicises *Superman* by outlining a significant medium for each era. Distinctions between these two accounts, such as Berger's exclusion of the radio serial, reveal that attempts to historicise a superhero's matrix can vary depending on which texts you choose to value. Due to the unwieldy

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<sup>226</sup> Larry Tye, *Superman: The High Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House, 2013), p. 160.

<sup>227</sup> Richard Berger, 'Are There Any More at Home Like You?: Rewiring Superman', *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 1:2 (2008), p. 88.

amount of texts of which a superhero franchise that has been running for decades can comprise, no reasonably contained account could discuss every single text, or potentially even every single incarnation. However, to appreciate the parameters and operations of a superhero's matrix, it is necessary to not just discuss key incarnations, but also dialogue enacted between them. While both Tye and Berger are keen to outline interactions between incarnations of *Superman*, their project of allocating one medium's incarnation to each era imposes a linear framework on the matrix. As demonstrated in my review of literature's discussion of problems with applying linear models of development to a genre or superhero, such approaches obscure the significant intertextual exchanges that occur along non-linear routes.

Although my discussion of *Superman* texts released in the four decades preceding the feature film necessarily cannot be exhaustive, exploring heterogeneous textual intersections will enable me to sketch the textual network's shape. The group of texts that I have chosen to analyse have been selected both for the prominent positions each once held in the *Superman* matrix, and for the fact that they enable me to explore exchanges between the formal properties of an array of different media and formats. For the sake of space, certain significant incarnations have had to be omitted, such as the highly popular daily *Superman* newspaper comic strip that started in 1939 and by 1942 was featured in 285 newspapers worldwide.<sup>228</sup> However, such omissions are justified by the fact that most of these texts' formal properties are present in included texts. For example, I analyse a variety of *Superman* comic books in detail, thus ensuring that, although the newspaper strip itself is not studied, most of

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<sup>228</sup> Tye, *Superman*, p. 57. Tye states that 'the *Houston Chronicle* was the first paper to sign up, followed by the *Milwaukee Journal* and *San Antonio Express*; by the end of 1939, sixty papers were running the daily feature and a Sunday strip was gearing up' (p. 38). The *Superman* newspaper strip has been credited with introducing narrative elements that would subsequently become central to the eponymous character's mythology, such as naming his home planet Krypton in the first instalment (discussed by Tye on p. 40). Another incarnation credited with adding significant narrative elements to the mythology that, for the sake of space, I will omit from this study is the 1942 novel written by George Lowther with art by Joe Schuster, *The Adventures of Superman* (repr. Bedford: Applewood Books, 1995). In his introduction to this reprinted edition, Roger Stern identifies the novel's contributions to the character's mythology as changing Superman's Kryptonian parents' names from Jor-L and Lora to Jor-el and Lara (in subsequent incarnations the E is capitalised but the spelling retained), and providing an expanded depiction of Krypton before its destruction, along with a detailed section on Clark's upbringing in Smallville, in which his powers develop gradually.

the formal configurations available to it are examined. While many of the texts I discuss have similar names, they can be distinguished through identification with either a key production body, era or medium. In associating incarnations with individual factors I do not wish to obscure the intertextual dialogue through which a text is formed. I merely identify texts this way to enable clarity in my analysis.

I discuss a range of *Superman* comics produced in the forty years preceding *Superman: The Movie*. My analysis typically refers to specific issues, but it is useful to establish some broad groupings that indicate distinct approaches taken in the periods of *Superman* comics I discuss most frequently. I adopt the most commonly used delegation of ages of superhero comics provided by Coogan, as discussed in my review of literature, to connote these different approaches. The groups of comics I apply these ages to have more contained parameters than the ages themselves, but are neatly separated by these eras. Superman's 1938 debut in *Action Comics* #1, written by Jerry Siegel with art by Joe Shuster, and *Superman* comics published in the following few years, feature a superhero whose powers are not as strong as in later incarnations fighting urban crime and corruption. Superman comics produced in 1957-1970, when Mort Weisinger was editor, greatly expanded Superman's mythology, introducing a range of other super powered beings and placing greater emphasis on science fiction narratives.<sup>229</sup> Many of these more fantastical elements were banished from the officially sanctioned matrix by Weisinger's replacement, Julius Schwartz, in 1970s *Superman* comics.<sup>230</sup> I identify these three groups as the 'Golden Age', 'Silver Age' and 'Bronze Age' *Superman* comics, respectively.

Superman was disseminated into a range of media and formats in the decades following his first comic book adventure. Radio serial *The Adventures of Superman* (WOR/MBS/ABC, 1940-1951) was the first incarnation of *Superman* in a medium other than comics. As it is the only radio adaptation that I discuss, the medium becomes the defining factor. I therefore refer to it simply as the 'radio serial'. The first screen adaptations of *Superman* were animations. Seventeen cartoons were produced in total,

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<sup>229</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these changes, see Tye, *Superman*, pp. 160-175.

<sup>230</sup> For further discussion of *Superman* under Schwartz's editorship, see Tye, *Superman*, pp. 205-210.

the first nine by Fleischer Studios (1941-1942). The company was reformed as Famous Studios after Paramount, who distributed the films, increasingly funded production and eventually purchased all of Fleischer's assets, fired Dave and Max Fleischer. Famous Studios produced the subsequent eight cartoons (1942-1943).<sup>231</sup> There are certain stylistic and narrative differences between the cartoons produced by Fleischer and Famous Studios. When referring to these specific features, I identify the cartoons by their separate studios. However, when discussing traits apparent in all seventeen cartoons I discuss them as the 'Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons'. Superman began featuring in live-action screen adaptations ten years after being introduced to the world. The first two of these can each be most readily identified by their medium and format. *Superman* (Spencer Gordon Bennet and Thomas Carr, 1948) and *Atom Man vs. Superman* (Spencer Gordon Bennet, 1950) were the first and only *Superman* film serials. I discuss these as the 'film serials'. The first feature length incarnation of *Superman* on cinema screens was *Superman and the Mole-Men* (Lee Sholem, 1951). This film acted as a pilot for television series *Adventures of Superman* (first-run syndication, 1952-1958), which I refer to as the 'television series'.<sup>232</sup>

The arrangement of a superhero's textual matrix can shift as texts fall in and out of favour. Berger argues that an individual text (the example he analyses being *Superman: The Movie*) can become central to, and 'rewire' other texts in, a franchise, while other texts that are expelled become 'disconnected'.<sup>233</sup> Thinking of texts in a franchise as engaged in a perpetual struggle for centrality and dominance is a useful way to envision the shifting shape of a textual matrix, and appreciate the specific ways each incarnation places itself in relation to others. In making a bid for centrality, incarnations can push others into marginal positions. This line of thought also provides a framework in which to trace how tropes and conventions are formed through being reflected between popular incarnations.

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<sup>231</sup> For a discussion of the collapse of Fleischer Studios and subsequent reconstruction as Famous Studios see Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 301-306.

<sup>232</sup> *Superman and the Mole Men* was also edited into two parts to produce the final two episodes of the first season of *Adventures of Superman*.

<sup>233</sup> Berger, 'Are There Any More at Home Like You?'

However, Berger's notion of texts that are pushed to the periphery being disconnected from the franchise contrasts Brooker's argument that texts can never be completely expelled from the *Batman* matrix. Through my analysis of how tropes and character traits metamorphose as they are reflected between incarnations of *Superman*, I will determine whether decentred incarnations are removed from intertextual dialogue, or if their presence is still apparent in the textual matrix.

### *Establishing Superman with Images, Words and Sounds*

As Superman developed, tropes and identifying features were established through being reflected in and reiterated by different forms and media. Considering the tendency for comics to be perceived as an image-based medium, it is unsurprising that a superhero's visual qualities and iconography are often focused on in discussions of their identifying traits. For example, when analysing the cover of *Action Comics #1*, Grant Morrison states:

Aside from the bold Deco *whoosh* of the *Action Comics* logo, the date (June 1938), the issue (no. 1), and the price (10 cents), there is no copy and not a single mention of the name *Superman*. Additional words would have been superfluous. The message was succinct: Action was what mattered. What a hero did counted far more than the things he said, and from the beginning, Superman was in constant motion.<sup>234</sup>

This notion of pictorial elements and motion being central to *Superman* is supported within the comic. By the nature of their narratives, as Martyn Pedler asserts, 'in superhero adventures, action is everything'.<sup>235</sup> Kinetic activity is emphasised throughout the Superman story in *Action Comics #1* in action sequences that demonstrate the superhero's extraordinary physical abilities. Meanwhile, Superman's brightly coloured costume provides the most eye-catching motif throughout the story. Key visual tropes are also established, such as images of bullets deflecting off Superman's broad chest. These traits are recreated in early screen adaptations. The Fleischer cartoons in particular are dominated by balletic battles against fantastic adversaries. Meanwhile, the Fleischer/Famous Studios

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<sup>234</sup> Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), pp. 5-6. Italics in original.

<sup>235</sup> Pedler, 'The Fastest Man Alive', p. 251.



cartoons, film serials and television series each frequently feature medium shots of bullets ricocheting off Superman's chest.

Despite the significance and endurance of *Superman's* iconography, visual tropes are by no means the only components that define *Superman*. Catchphrases, conversational exchanges and worded descriptions can be just as, if not in certain cases more, familiar than the character's iconography. These can be reflected between written and spoken forms in different incarnations. I shall use the term 'worded identifiers' to describe worded tropes that perform the same identifying function as iconography.

The first page of the Superman story in *Action Comics #1* comprises several panels, which communicate Superman's abilities and mission through a combination of words and images [Figure 11]. The descriptions of most of Superman's powers are complemented by a pictorial demonstration, such as an image of Clark jumping over a skyscraper depicting his ability to "hurdle a twenty-story building", one of him lifting a girder showing how he can "raise tremendous weights", and one of him racing a locomotive showcasing his capacity to "run faster than an express train". These powers are "scientifically" rationalised in panels where images and captions compare the abilities to those of ants who can lift weights far greater than themselves and grasshoppers who leap "what to man would be the space of several city blocks". This page also features the first usage of the enduring worded identifier that names Superman a "champion of the oppressed". Written descriptions of Superman's powers that compare him to skyscrapers and trains, along with images of Superman leaping skyscrapers and racing trains, are peppered throughout subsequent Golden Age comics. Superman stories published in the few years following his debut often open with a caption that repeats these familiar phrases that indicate Superman's abilities and dedication to liberating the oppressed.<sup>236</sup> These

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<sup>236</sup> The wording can alter from issue to issue, or at other times be repeated verbatim. A popular wording used in multiple issues from this era is: 'Leaping over skyscrapers, running faster than an express-train, springing great distances and heights, lifting and smashing tremendous weights, possessing an impenetrable skin – these are the amazing attributes which Superman, saviour of the helpless and oppressed, avails himself as he battles the forces of evil and injustice!'. Golden Age *Superman* stories that deploy this description almost word for word include

captions are supported by pictorial demonstrations of one of Superman's abilities, which changes from issue to issue. Golden Age *Superman* comics thus established both worded and pictorial identifying motifs that could accommodate some variation but always work toward the same effect.

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Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Superman and the High Seas', *Action Comics* #15 (August 1939) (repr. in Yow, *Superman*, pp. 230-242); Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'The Return of the Ultra-Humanite', *Action Comics* #17 (October 1939) (repr. in Yow, *Superman*, pp. 317-329); Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Superman's Super Campaign', *Action Comics* #18 (November 1939) (repr. in Yow, *Superman*, pp. 331-343); Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Superman and the Purple Plague', *Action Comics* #19 (December 1939) (repr. in Yow, *Superman*, pp. 345-356); Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Europe at War, Part 1', *Action Comics* #22 (March 1940) (repr. in Yow, *Superman*, pp. 420-432); and Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Carnahan's Heir', *Action Comics* #24 (May 1940) (repr. in Yow, *Superman*, pp. 501-513).



Figure 11 Superman's abilities and mission are established in Action Comics #1

Morrison attributes *Superman's* huge initial popularity to these motifs, proposing that their effect had particular resonance to post-depression America:

If the dystopian nightmare visions of the age foresaw a dehumanized, mechanized world, Superman offered another possibility: an image of a fiercely human tomorrow that delivered the spectacle of triumphant individualism exercising its sovereignty over the implacable forces of industrial oppression.<sup>237</sup>

Superman can thus be read as a conqueror of industrialisation, leaping and overtaking its inventions. He can also be read as a representation of the fulfilment of modernity's promise to raise humanity ever higher, propel us ever faster. Hassler-Forest outlines this dichotomy, stating that superheroes 'represent not only a fantasy of overcoming the obvious limitation of the human body within the physically and mentally overpowering vertical landscapes of the modern metropolis; they can also be read as the literal embodiments of modernist aspirations'.<sup>238</sup> Worded and pictorial motifs thus collaborate to create figurative meaning that weighs aspirations and fears of industrialisation. These concerns were presented are reiterated as central themes of *Superman*, while also establishing the superhero genre's discourse on the urban.

*Superman* incarnations in other media do not just reflect worded identifiers established in comics, but also create their own. The opening to the first episode of the radio serial features a conversation between awestruck onlookers that introduces every proceeding episode:

"Up in the sky, look!"

"It's a bird!"

"It's a plane!"

"It's Superman!"

This exchange also features in the openings of the Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons and television series. Despite this worded identifier becoming a core defining feature of *Superman* in these first few

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<sup>237</sup> Morrison, *Supergods*, p. 7.

<sup>238</sup> Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes*, p. 174.

decades, it was still able to be rearticulated in unique ways. For example, in the first film serial the following exchange occurs between onlookers who witness Superman's first public act of heroics:

"Something flew in that window!"

"It was a bird."

"It couldn't be, it was too big!"

"It was a man."

"But he flew through the air!"<sup>239</sup>

This conversation pointedly recalls the familiar exchange, initially mistaking Superman for a bird while encapsulating the sense of wonder as onlookers conclude that they saw a flying man. The famed exchange is also reflected into *Superman* comics. For example, in *Superman* #276, produced during the Bronze Age, a crowd utters the words, only for a passer-by looking toward the fourth wall to say "Hunh. More tourists who come from all over the world just to catch a glimpse of the superguy!"<sup>240</sup> While in this period *Superman* comics were stripped of some of their quirkier characters, and Clark's traditional job as newspaper reporter updated to television news anchor, this self-reflexive statement reveals that the comics still defined themselves in relation to other incarnations. However, branding characters who utter the exchange as 'tourists' suggests that texts in which this exchange was a core motif are now outdated and only offer a basic 'glimpse' of *Superman*. The specific way the worded identifier is presented thus seeks to arrange the *Superman* matrix by pushing older incarnations to the periphery and the Bronze Age comics to the centre.

When this worded identifier is used to introduce the radio serial, Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons and television series, it is preceded by the sound of wind whistling that signifies Superman's flight.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> This exchange occurs in chapter two, titled 'Depths Of The Earth'.

<sup>240</sup> Elliott S! Maggin (w), Curt Swan (p) and Bob Oksner (i). 'Make Way for Captain Thunder', *Superman* #276 (June 1974) (repr. in Michael Wright (ed.), *Superman in the Seventies* (New York: DC Comics, 2000), pp. 9-28).

<sup>241</sup> This sound first featured in the radio serial.

Tye illustrates the importance placed on this sound and the information it conveys when he discusses its creation:

At first a hand-cranked wind machine had to suffice, but the artifice grew more convincing with the addition of several recorded sounds: a wind tunnel playing in reverse, a plane diving with a deafening roar, and a newsreel of an artillery shell whizzing through the Spanish Civil War. For Superman's landing, the sound guys slowed by hand those recordings, the way disc jockeys do today. When the record stopped, listeners were assured that Superman was back on solid ground.<sup>242</sup>

The sound is used throughout these three incarnations to not only signify Superman's flight, but also indicate whether he is taking off, in mid-flight or landing. This device acts as a reflection of motion lines, the pictorial signifiers that denote Superman's flight in comic books. Thus, a visual trope is transformed into an aural one. The specific qualities of each facilitate different effects. While the direction in which a motion line points indicates Superman's exact trajectory, the fading in and out of the sound cannot be so precise, only roughly suggesting Superman's position in relation to the action. However, the sound can signal that Superman is approaching a scene, whereas motion lines generally work best when he is already in, or leaving, a panel. As this particular sound that came to signify Superman is not iconographic, or comprised of words, it is an 'aural identifier'.<sup>243</sup>

While images, lines of dialogue and sounds can signify Superman on their own, combinations of all three in screen adaptations provide powerful and succinct evocations of the superhero. Similar to the summaries of Superman's abilities provided in the openings of early comics, the Fleischer Studios cartoons announce "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!", after the "up in the sky..." exchange in the opening.<sup>244</sup> In basing Superman's powers on what Marek Wasielewski terms a 'machine paradigm', he is again aligned with

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<sup>242</sup> Tye, *Superman*, p. 90.

<sup>243</sup> Television series episode 'The Talking Clue' demonstrates that this aural identifier can signify Superman without any other cues: a recording of the sound first convinces Jimmy Olsen (Jack Larson) that Superman is approaching, and is later used to scare a gangster.

<sup>244</sup> For the final two Fleischer Studios cartoons and the first of the eight Famous Studios cartoons, the opening was changed to "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to soar higher than any plane!". For the remaining Famous Studios cartoons, the opening line was changed again to "Faster than a streak of lightning! More powerful than the pounding surf! Mightier than a roaring hurricane!"

the technological achievements of modernity.<sup>245</sup> Images and sounds emphasise this alignment. The metallic burst of a gun being fired and a bullet shooting across the screen follow the first proclamation, a medium shot of a train racing along, pistons pumping, complements the second, and an image of Superman leaping a towering skyscraper accompanies the third. The gunshot and train provide hard mechanical sounds to enhance the juxtaposition of Superman and industrialisation.<sup>246</sup> The dialogue and sounds were clearly deemed powerful enough by themselves to be introduced to the opening of the radio serial in 1942.<sup>247</sup> This new radio serial opening also added a vital few words that have endured as perhaps the most familiar worded identifier for *Superman*. Previously, in the radio serial and Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons Superman stood for “truth and justice”. In the year following the attack on Pearl Harbour, the radio serial added a new element that was firmly rooted in sociopolitical surroundings: Superman now fought for “truth, justice and the American way”.

The full opening to the radio serial now initiated with the ‘faster than a speeding bullet...’ declaration, proceeded to the ‘up in the sky...’ exchange, before stating:

Yes it’s Superman, strange visitor from another world, who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never ending battle for truth, justice and the American way.

The television series reproduces this introduction almost verbatim and sets it to images, some reflecting those featured in previous screen adaptations, others being new additions.<sup>248</sup> For example, on “faster than a speeding bullet” a hand points a gun at the viewer, then turns ninety degrees and fires a bullet across the screen. On “more powerful than a locomotive” a train races toward the fourth

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<sup>245</sup> Marek Wasielewski, “This Amazing Stranger from the Planet Krypton’: Industrial Design and the Machine Paradigm in the Fleischer Animated Superman Shorts 1941-43’, *Film International*, 5:2 (2007), p. 10. Wasielewski analyses the various ways in which Superman’s body is likened to machinery in the Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons.

<sup>246</sup> There is no sound representing the skyscraper.

<sup>247</sup> This introduction occurred when the show moved from WOR to the Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS). I have not been able to access the first episode after the move to MBS, but the earliest available, ‘The Wolfe Part 4’, which broadcast on 07/09/1942, and was the sixth episode after the network change, has this opening intact.

<sup>248</sup> The only alteration in wording is the use of ‘planet’ instead of ‘world’.

wall, before a close up on its wheels is shown.<sup>249</sup> On “able to leap tall buildings in a single bound” the camera tilts up a skyscraper to reveal its imposing height. This sequence metamorphoses the opening of the Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons, by recreating it in live-action and altering the framing. Each shot places the viewer in a position of vulnerability, either in the sight of a gun, the path of a train or placed at the base of a towering skyscraper. The proceeding shot of Superman flying through the clouds, accompanied by the familiar sound of whirling wind, announces his ability to overcome modernity’s threatening creations. His powerful status is reinforced in a proceeding high-angled shot of onlookers performing the “up in the sky...” routine. As with the Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons, an image of Superman is then shown, chest puffed out and fists on hips, which dissolves into one of Clark. Whereas the cartoons’ opening ended with Clark, the television series cross-fades back to Superman on the word ‘justice’. Superman now stands in his heroic stance with a U.S. flag waving in the background. This image visually aligns Superman and the American way.

As the above analysis demonstrates, *Superman’s* core motifs can be iconic, worded or aural. Motifs accumulate, combine and metamorphose as they are reflected between incarnations and media. The rearticulation of motifs can suggest that incarnations to previously use them still hold a position of relative centrality in the textual matrix, while specific ways in which motifs are deployed can seek to rearrange the matrix. The transformations that motifs undergo also create different effects that provide one of the many ways in which Clark/Superman can be repositioned on a spectrum of possible roles.

### *The Clark Kent/Superman Spectrum*

Eco’s perception of superheroes as static myths contends that a superhero has fixed traits, which are reiterated from text to text.<sup>250</sup> Following Eco, Matt Yockey argues that the Clark/Superman duality’s function as an inflexible binary is a key way that the character’s stasis is maintained: ‘both Superman

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<sup>249</sup> This describes the opening as seen in the first two seasons. In subsequent seasons different footage is used for the shot of the train, and there is no second shot presenting a close up on the wheels.

<sup>250</sup> Eco, ‘The Myth of Superman’.



and Clark Kent can never change because they are fixed contrasts to one another. Superman is defined by what he is not, Clark Kent, and vice versa'.<sup>251</sup> Vanessa Russell, further explaining this binary, outlines the traits attributed to each identity:

The figure of the reporter is a dialectical construct, a dry, dull, mild persona who exists in opposition to Superman, the supercharged champion of the underdog and vigilante seeker of justice. There is no Hegelian synthesis in Superman: Kent does not take on heroic characteristics without first changing into a cape and tights, and Superman does not take on Kent's "fear-struck" or "meek" characteristics without first donning the clothes of the working journalist.<sup>252</sup>

Clark is the meek journalist, Superman the heroic vigilante. Yockey and Russell assert that there is no overlap between these traits; different outfits delineate discrete identities.

Conversely, Brooker argues that a superhero's characterisation is fluid. Brooker's model of a spectrum enables the range of roles a superhero can adopt to be explored by placing the superhero in relation to a figure seemingly perceived as their binary opposite. Through deploying this model, Brooker argues that Batman can be anything, and that alternate readings, such as queer readings, gain validity and enrich the character.<sup>253</sup> Brooker does not place Batman's civilian identity Bruce Wayne on a spectrum with Batman, but rather positions Wayne as a rigid mannequin, with Batman's 'mask hiding the nothingness of his civilian shell'.<sup>254</sup> Brooker therefore sees Batman as a rich and varied superhero, whose multiplicities become apparent through interactions with his arch nemesis Joker, but presents Wayne as a shell with a fixed meaning.

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<sup>251</sup> Matt Yockey, 'Somewhere in Time: Utopia and the Return of Superman,' *The Velvet Light Trap* 61 (2008), p. 27.

<sup>252</sup> Vanessa Russell, 'The Mild-Mannered Reporter: How Clark Kent Surpassed Superman', in Angela Ndalians (ed.), *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 216.

<sup>253</sup> Brooker explains: 'If we acknowledge that Joker is a possible variant of Batman, and that Batman knows their characteristics overlap, we can see his refusal ever to fully succumb to that alternate self as a struggle that enriches rather than diminishes his character, making it more complex; even a fan who objects to gay readings and clings to the idea of Batman as staunchly heterosexual could agree that a Dark Knight who struggles against his own Joker-like aspects is more interesting than a character without conflict'. Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. 177.

<sup>254</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. 170.

A superhero's civilian identity does not have to be fixed in character. In fact, by applying Brooker's spectrum model to Clark/Superman, I will demonstrate that it is through Superman's interactions with Clark that the possibilities of both identities become evident. Instead of analysing incarnations in a strict chronological order, I look in turn at different strategies and factors that affect Clark's and Superman's positioning on their spectrum. For each element discussed I outline some significant ways that the identities are reconfigured in different incarnations.

Brownie and Graydon argue that the outfits worn by superhero and civilian identity are both carefully constructed to present the two identities as binaries: '[t]he superhero costume constructs uniqueness, while the civilian wardrobe constructs normality by adhering to convention'.<sup>255</sup> Superman's vivid red and blue costume certainly provides a stark contrast to Clark's typically grey suits. However, an array of visual and worded devices for presenting the identities act as other factors through which they are separated, while also offering means through which the two can be drawn together.

*Action Comics* #1 firmly establishes a binary separation of identities that would continue to be upheld in Golden Age *Superman* comics. In this first story Clark plays the weakling, and presents as possessing a pitiful lack of masculinity, with Lois Lane venomously branding him "a spineless, unbearable coward".<sup>256</sup> Clark is rarely a dominant figure in compositions, and is typically placed in a submissive position when sharing a panel with Lois. For example, twice in the issue Lois is in the foreground of panels with her back to Clark, refusing to face him [Figure 12]. As such, 'meek' became the key adjective used to describe Clark in Golden Age comic books.<sup>257</sup> Conversely, Superman's immense physical strength is foregrounded, evident from the iconic front cover, which depicts him holding a car above his head and smashing it against a rock. Superman's interactions with Lois Lane also exhibit his intimidating physical qualities. The two meet properly for the first time in a panel where they stand opposite each other.

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<sup>255</sup> Brownie and Graydon, *The Superhero Costume*, p. 71.

<sup>256</sup> Lois' surname is not provided until *Action Comics* #2. Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Revolution in San Morte Pt. 2', *Action Comics* #2 (July 1938) (repr. in Yow (ed.), *Superman*, pp. 28-41).

<sup>257</sup> The first usage of the word 'meek' to describe Clark is in Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Superman's Phoney Manager', *Action Comics* #6 (November 1938) (repr. in Yow (ed.), *Superman*, pp. 80-92).

His statement “you needn’t be afraid of me. I won’t harm you” is undermined by him leaning forward, looming over her, forcing her downward into the corner of the panel, causing a compositional imbalance that stresses his dominance [Figure 13]. Two panels later, when Superman says “I’d advise you not to print this little episode”, Lois’ continued compositional marginalisation and shocked expression cause the line to come across as a threat.

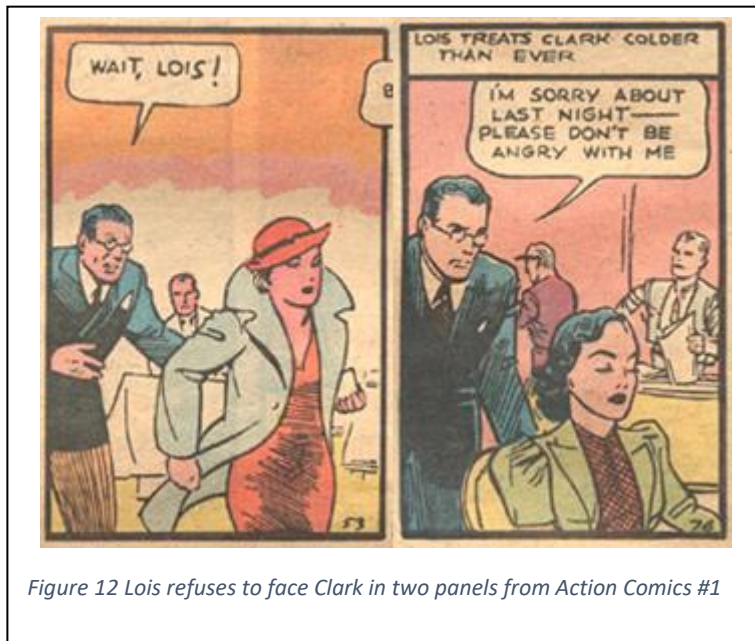


Figure 12 Lois refuses to face Clark in two panels from Action Comics #1

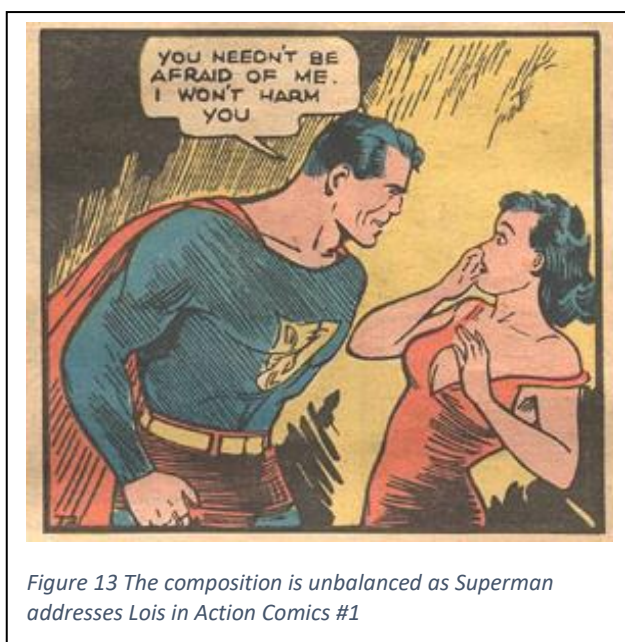


Figure 13 The composition is unbalanced as Superman addresses Lois in Action Comics #1

Another differentiation of the Clark and Superman identities in Golden Age *Superman* comics develops through distinct speech patterns. Clark is polite but timid, while Superman is self-assured and aggressive. This distinction is not just communicated by differences between what they say, but also by the presentation of their dialogue. Clark's dialogue, mainly when talking to Lois, is often interspersed with grammatical ellipses and nervous tics such as 'er' to convey stuttering. Conversely, bold font is used for key words that Superman utters, with exclamation marks commonly ending his sentences, to express his confidence. This strategy uses the iconic properties of written words to hold the two identities apart. Pictorial and worded devices in *Action Comics* #1 therefore consistently express the Clark/Superman binary as weakness/strong masculinity.

Radio and screen incarnations use their specific formal properties to articulate the relationship between Clark and Superman in different ways. The Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons harness animation's ability to present movement. Superman's extraordinary abilities are showcased in elaborate battles in which he races and leaps fluidly around the screen.<sup>258</sup> These acrobatics distinguish him from the grounded and restricted Clark. The identities are also distinguished by what they say and how they say it. The cartoons feature minimal dialogue, particularly for Superman who only speaks in two of the seventeen cartoons, and even in these is limited to a few lines.<sup>259</sup> Superman's largely mute demeanour ensures that his characterisation is conveyed almost solely through superhuman physical feats. When he does speak, voice actor Bud Collyer uses a far deeper voice than he does for Clark. Collyer uses the same vocal distinction to differentiate the identities in the radio serial, while Kirk Alyn similarly gives Superman a deeper voice than Clark in the film serials. This technique is an aural

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<sup>258</sup> This is particularly the case with the Fleischer cartoons, which feature far more elaborate battles than those produced by Famous Studios.

<sup>259</sup> The cartoons in which Superman speaks are *The Arctic Giant* (Dave Fleischer, 1942) and *The Magnetic Telescope* (Dave Fleischer, 1942), both produced by Fleischer Studios. The only character to whom he speaks is Lois, either checking if she is unharmed, or giving her orders regarding how to deal with dangerous situations. Clark's dialogue is also very minimal, often only having a couple of lines in each cartoon.

reflection of grammatical and iconic devices used to separate the identities in written words in comic books.<sup>260</sup>

Despite the seeming establishment of this vocal distinction as a trope, George Reeves, in the television series, used the same gentle but authoritative tone for both identities.<sup>261</sup> However, as the first actors to play Clark/Superman in live-action adaptations, Alyn and Reeves had an expanded range of performative aspects they could use to reposition the identities in relation to each other. Alyn's Clark is far from a coward, staying composed in chapter seven of the first serial while being held at gunpoint.<sup>262</sup> He is also very action-orientated, for instance tackling and restraining an assassin in chapter three of *Atom Man vs. Superman*.<sup>263</sup> Alyn's energetic heroics as both Clark and Superman draw the two identities into close alignment. Reeves' Clark on occasion demonstrates proficiency in physical combat, and is generally assertive and brave, yet also very gentle around members of the public and his co-workers. This gentleness is evident right from every episode's opening sequence, in which an image of Superman standing with his chest puffed out, fists on hips [Figure 14], dissolves into one of Clark, who stands less imposingly, arms hanging by his sides [Figure 15]. These postures resonate throughout the episodes. Clark often leans casually on desks. Conversely, Superman enters scenes by smashing through walls with his barrel chest before either assuming the assured stance with fists on

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<sup>260</sup> The endurance of this trait is demonstrated by its foregrounding and subversion in a scene from television adaptation of the Broadway musical *It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman* (Jack Regas, 1975). A disillusioned Clark/Superman (David Wilson) is in his apartment. He decides that Clark should go to work, but upon looking in the mirror realises he is in his Superman costume and states "Oh boy, I forgot to get dressed". Realising this was spoken in his unimposing Clark voice, he repeats the line in his deeper Superman voice to present a unified identity. He then bemoans "aw, everything's all mixed up. What's the matter, am I losing control?" Throughout this line his intonation wavers between the two voices. This confusion suggests that differentiation between Clark and Superman's voices can be so vital to distinguishing the characters that having the voice not correlate with the outfit can be symptomatic of a crisis of identity. For a discussion of the Broadway production of *It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman* see Tye, *Superman*, pp. 175-179.

<sup>261</sup> It should be noted that, when demanded, Reeves can provide vocal distinction. For example, in an episode titled 'Superman Week', Clark/Superman fakes a television interview between his two identities by delivering Clark's voice, in an off-screen recording, nasally in comparison to Superman's more measured and sincere tone.

<sup>262</sup> 'Into the Electric Furnace!', *Superman*.

<sup>263</sup> 'Ablaze in the Sky!', *Atom Man vs. Superman*.

hips or standing poised for action, feet apart and arms raised. Reeves' postures affirm Clark's mild nature while conveying Superman's heroic vitality.



Figure 14 George Reeves as Superman in the opening of the television series



Figure 15 George Reeves as Clark in the opening of the television series

Clark therefore does not always have such a weak presence as he did in *Action Comics #1*. The transformed nature of Clark in many incarnations is evident in the fact that, rather than being described as “meek”, the opening sequences for the radio serial, Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons and television series introduce him as “mild mannered”. These mild mannered incarnations are more respected within the diegesis than their Golden Age comic book counterparts, often exuding a gentle but worldly authority that more closely binds them to Superman.

Each incarnation utilises its particular formal devices to create motifs for presenting the transformation between identities. These motifs further illuminate distinctions and overlaps between Clark and Superman. Even though *Action Comics #1* presents the binary at its starkest, the binary is destabilised in a panel that isolates a moment midway through the transformation, Clark's shirt half covering Superman's costume [Figure 16]. In this image, the ability for comics to depict actions frozen at salient moments enables the character to be suspended at a point where the attire of the Clark identity literally overlaps Superman's costume. Rather than upholding a binary between reporter and superhero, in presenting the identities as two sides of the same man, the image suggests that every white-collar worker has hidden potential waiting to be unleashed.



Figure 16 Clark/Superman midway through his transformation in Action Comics #1

An overlap between identities as one transforms into the other can also be exhibited through worded devices. While Collyer's distinct voices for each identity clearly separate them in the radio serial and Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons, this device also creates a link between identities when the shift occurs midsentence. As described by Tye:

Collyer drew on his training as a crooner to underscore the difference between Clark and Superman, playing the former in a tenor that oozed milquetoast [sic], then dropping several pitches midsentence to a gravelly baritone that was just right for the world's strongest man, yet making clear that both voices came from the same man.<sup>264</sup>

The worded identifier, "this looks like a job for Superman", exemplifies the shift in vocal register described above. The first five words are spoken in Clark's gentler tone, and on "for Superman"

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<sup>264</sup> Tye, *Superman*, pp. 86-87.

Collyer's voice dramatically drops into the superhero's deep pitch. Aurally signalling the shift between identities in a single sentence creates a closer connection between the identities than the grammatical and iconic vocal segregation in Golden Age comic books.

While the tonal shift during "this looks like a job for Superman" is the central way the radio serial signifies Clark's transformation into Superman, the Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons combine it with an iconic motif. In these cartoons, Clark utters the catchphrase aloud before entering a concealed location. The audience witnesses the hidden transformation in silhouette, as the outline of the figure changing clothes through a window [Figure 17] or as a shadow on a wall. Seconds later he re-emerges as Superman. This shadow play is consistent with the cartoons' expressionistic stylisation and emphasis on fluid movement, while granting the transformation a sense of mystery. Thus, spoken words and motion create a comparable link between identities as the static image from *Action Comics* #1, but the abstracted nature of the visual element upholds the Superman identity's mystique rather than linking the identity to the contemporary white-collar workplace.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Although used in the majority of the Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons, the silhouetted transformation motif does not feature in all of them. In two of the Fleischer cartoons the transformation is shown directly, rather than in silhouette, although in each case there are objects covering at least half of Clark/Superman's body. In *The Magnetic Telescope* the change occurs in the back of a car, so that the audience only see the head and shoulders of Clark/Superman, while in *Electric Earthquake* (Dave Fleischer, 1942) a wall covers the bottom half of Kent/Superman during the transformation.





Figure 17 The silhouetted transformation motif in the Fleischer/Famous Studios Superman cartoons.

The silhouetted transformation motif's successful establishment as a key signifier for Superman is evident in the fact that it is parodied in Warner Bros. cartoon *Super-Rabbit* (Chuck Jones (as Charles M. Jones), 1943). Upon entering a glass booth, Bugs Bunny changes in silhouette only to emerge triumphantly in a Little Bo Peep outfit, realise his error and re-enter the booth, repeat the silhouetted change and emerge in a baggy superhero outfit modelled on Superman's. Schatz discusses successful parody of a genre as a sign that audiences have been exposed so much to the genre that they have a keen familiarity with its classical conventions.<sup>266</sup> Once conventions have reached this level of "saturation", texts and audiences can 'look at the *form itself* to examine and appreciate its structure and cultural appeal'.<sup>267</sup> The sense of mystery at the core of the motif's appeal is acknowledged and subverted through being shared in by Bugs Bunny who apparently, like the audience, cannot see the particulars of his transformation, and puts on the wrong costume. If we recall the parallels illuminated in my review of literature between the functions of a genre and franchise, then we can recognise that parody of *Superman's* motifs reveal their firm establishment in popular culture.<sup>268</sup> Peter Coogan cites

<sup>266</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 38.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. Emphasis in original.

<sup>268</sup> *Super-Rabbit* also parodies many other *Superman* motifs. For example, it features the line "this looks like a job for Super-Rabbit".

the first parody of the superhero genre occurring in *All American Comics* #20 in 1940.<sup>269</sup> *Super Bunny* reveals that, by 1943, *Superman* motifs rooted in other media had achieved audience saturation.

Live-action incarnations reflect some of these motifs and combine them with new strategies to present the transformation. The serials deploy the “this looks like a job for Superman” worded identifier, complete with tonal dip, as Alyn runs behind an object, such as a bush or a rock, whilst removing his jacket.<sup>270</sup> The film then cuts away before cutting back a moment later, as Superman emerges.<sup>271</sup> In my review of literature I discussed two comics panels in which iconic indicators suggest to the reader a swift transformation enacted by shape-shifting mutant Mystique. The *Superman* film serials enact a character transformation in the gap of an edit rather than that of a gutter. While the effect is comparable, the comic’s panels are separated spatially, the film’s shots are separated temporally. The serial uses this temporality to give the transformation an exact speed; the transformation is supposed to have happened in the mere moments between which we see Clark hide and Superman emerge. Thus, although the fluid visual evocation of the transformation in the Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons may be hard to replicate by a physical actor, the serials harness film’s spatiotemporal properties to create if not so much a physical, at least a temporal, link between identities.

The television series does not include the worded identifier. Instead, Reeves is shown taking off his hat and/or glasses and loosening his tie with a sharp jerk while running to a concealed location. The repetition of these specific movements, which Gary Grossman refers to as ‘the traditional off-with-the-glasses routine’, in every episode creates a familiar motif for signifying the transformation.<sup>272</sup> This performative motif conveys comparable information to the “this looks like a job for Superman” worded identifier. As with the film serials, the television series does not actually show the transformation, but

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<sup>269</sup> Coogan, *Superhero*, p. 27.

<sup>270</sup> The film serials’ adoption of the “this looks like a job for Superman” worded identifier is further evidenced by chapter five of the first serial being titled ‘A Job for Superman’, as is Alyn’s autobiography.

<sup>271</sup> This strategy is repeated when Superman transforms back into Clark. Superman’s flight in the serials is mostly realised using hand-drawn animation. The transformation from animated Superman to Alyn as Clark is therefore achieved through the same device as the transformation from Clark to Superman.

<sup>272</sup> Gary Grossman, *Superman: Serial to Cereal* (New York: Popular Library, 1976), p. 70.

conceals it through editing.<sup>273</sup> In removing a fluid transition from one character to another, such as a drop in tone as a catchphrase is uttered, or the transitional figure of a silhouette, this trait of the television series presents a clearer segregation of the Clark/Superman identities.

It should be noted that, although images in comics are static and cannot present actual movement like film and television, pictorial devices for indicating movement can exhibit a more fluid transition between identities than that offered by the film serials and television series. For example, in a panel from *Superman #233* Clark transforms to Superman in five figures depicting different stages of the transformation [Figure 18].<sup>274</sup> To the left is Clark, running around a corner and checking if anybody is looking, while performing the Reeves gesture of loosening his tie. The figures in the middle are faded, indicating temporality by denoting that these transitory stages are fading into the past. Only the feet and trail end of the cape of the fifth figure are visible, as Superman has leapt out of the right panel border. Wavy motion lines flowing from one figure to the next imbue the composition with fluidity and momentum. Thus, pictorial devices reflect the kind of smooth segue between identities evoked in other incarnations by devices unavailable to comics, such as an aural shift in intonation or moving silhouette.

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<sup>273</sup> It is not a fixed convention in the television series to see Superman emerge from the location in which he changed and leap away. After seeing Clark run into a concealed location, Superman often just arrives at the location of the crime partway through the next scene.

<sup>274</sup> Denny O'Neil (w), Curt Swan (p) and Murphy Anderson (i). 'Superman Breaks Loose', *Superman #233* (January 1971) (repr. in Wright, *Superman in the Seventies*, pp. 163-177).



Figure 18 The Clark to Superman transformation in *Superman* #233.

Production contexts also impact the presentation of the identities. For example, comparable budgetary constraints for the film serials and television series intersect with specific formats and genre preferences to produce unique narrative formations that influence characterisation. The quick-witted heroics of Alyn's Clark and Superman, which puts them on somewhat equal-footing, is in keeping with contemporaneous film serials, in which the action-adventure genre thrived, despite miniscule budgets. Tye states that, for the television series, there was 'a mere \$175 budgeted for each episode's flying sequences', making it economically viable to only feature Superman in each episode's climactic last few minutes.<sup>275</sup> Elsewhere, Grossman attributes Clark's greater screen time in the television series to the conventions of televisual narrative structure:

With less than half an hour to work with, exposition and ultimate resolution of conflict were only a commercial away from one another. There had to be a new reason each week for Lois, Jimmy or Perry White to be terrorised. It was Clark Kent who engineered their salvation, making the exciting switch to Superman only for the actual heroics.<sup>276</sup>

<sup>275</sup> Tye, *Superman*, p. 137.

<sup>276</sup> Grossman, *Superman*, p. 55. When Clark becomes a television news anchor in Bronze Age comic books, if Superman is needed Clark changes into the superhero during commercial breaks, and then has to change back before the broadcast resumes. This narrative device provides another, quite different, example of televisual structure inhibiting the amount of time that Superman can be operative.

Episodes of the television series generally revolve around a criminal investigation, the stakes heightening when one of Clark's friends is placed in danger. Clark, as an investigative reporter, solves the case before Superman apprehends the villain. Factors like budget and format therefore contribute to a metamorphosis of the relation between Clark and Superman to one of brains/brawn.

Elsewhere, the lack of economic restrictions on what kind of narratives can be told in animation and comics allow Superman's feats to be foregrounded. As noted earlier, the Fleischer/Famous cartoons primarily comprise of Superman engaging in elaborate battles. Silver Age comic books feature similarly vivid set-ups, but place the superhero in stories of intergalactic scope. As Superman ventures further away from Earth, the gap between him and his human identity also widens. These comics were not suturing the character with genres and formats established in other media, but rather able to partake in the fantastical excursions with which readers of superhero comics had grown familiar.

The characterisation of Clark/Superman is also formed through dialogue with sociopolitical contexts. Bradford W. Wright interlinks Superman's temperament in early comic book stories with external contexts: 'Siegel and Shuster's original character was actually a tough and cynical wise guy, similar to the hard-boiled detectives like Sam Spade who also became popular during the Depression years'.<sup>277</sup> Wright's observation outlines parallels between Superman's attitude and archetypes from hard-boiled crime fiction of tough, emotionally-cold men neglected by the establishment, who resonated with disenfranchised audiences during the Depression. An anti-establishment stance also manifests in Superman's role in Golden Age comic books as "champion of the oppressed", with early stories frequently concerning the hero liberating blue-collar workers from corporate and government corruption.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, p. 9.

<sup>278</sup> For a survey of Golden Age *Superman* stories in which Superman acts as a 'champion of the oppressed' see Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, pp. 11-13.

Superman's sociopolitical role shifts significantly in certain subsequent incarnations. At a seemingly opposite point of the spectrum to Golden Age comic books, the Famous Studios cartoons often function as propaganda. Five of the eight cartoons feature narratives about the war in which, for example, Superman is pitted against crassly caricatured Japanese saboteurs or aids U.S. secret agents.<sup>279</sup> Thus, rather than fighting for the underdog oppressed by the government, Superman fights for the nation of the U.S..

Besides World War II, a key contextual factor that has been attributed to superheroes' increased efforts to uphold the law in the decades after the genre's genesis is the social pressures against comic books in the 1950s, as notoriously fuelled by Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*.<sup>280</sup> Besides the Comics Code that the industry introduced to censor their product, Superman's publisher, National Comics, enforced even tougher guidelines on their own publications, one of their rules stating that 'heroes should act within the law, and *for* the law'.<sup>281</sup> Superman's affiliation with the "American way" led to some direct collaborations with governmental bodies. For instance, an episode of the television series titled 'Stamp Day for Superman' was made in cooperation with the United States Treasury Department, and shown in schools to promote savings bonds. The episode features Superman endorsing the saving stamps scheme, informing children that they can "be super citizens and have a super future by saving regularly with United States savings stamps". Elsewhere, Superman performs missions for President John F. Kennedy in two Silver Age comic book stories, 'The Superman Super-Spectacular' and 'Superman's Mission for President Kennedy'.<sup>282</sup> Superman texts that function as

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<sup>279</sup> These particular stories feature in *Japoteurs* (Seymour Kneitel, 1942) and *Secret Agent* (Seymour Kneitel, 1943)

<sup>280</sup> Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*.

<sup>281</sup> Tye, *Superman*, p. 149. National Comics would later become DC.

<sup>282</sup> Edmond Hamilton (w), Curt Swan (p) and George Klein (i). 'The Superman Super-Spectacular!', *Action Comics* #309 (New York: DC Comics, February 1964); Bill Finger (w), E. Nelson Bridwell (w) and Al Pastino (a). 'Superman's Mission for President Kennedy', *Superman* #170 (July 1964) (repr. in Dale Crain (ed.), *Superman in the Sixties* (New York: DC Comics, 1999), pp. 180-189). This story was published after Kennedy's death. A caption on the opening page states that the comic was written 'in close cooperation with the late President Kennedy' and published under instruction from President Lyndon B. Johnson.

propaganda, are produced in collaboration with the U.S. government and/or promote government interests manifest the “...American way” worded identifier’s patriotism in their narratives.

However, just as the characterisation of Clark/Superman can shift, so can the connotations of the “... American Way” worded identifier. For example, a 1946 story from the radio serial titled ‘Clan of the Fiery Cross’ pits Clark/Superman and the staff of the *Daily Planet* against the eponymous clan, a surrogate for the Ku Klux Klan, who are terrorising a Chinese family. Tye suggests that, due to racial segregation in America at the time of production, the show’s sponsors would have been uneasy about the persecuted family being African-American, but the writers were able to explore the discrimination of any race through an Asian family.<sup>283</sup> Superman and the *Daily Planet* staff express the idea that racial equality is integral to America throughout the story. For instance, in the final episode, when handing out trophies to Jimmy Olsen’s (Jackie Kelk) baseball team, who have the Chinese boy, Tommy Lee, as a pitcher, *Planet* editor Perry White (Julian Noa) states “you’ve proved that youngsters of different races and creeds can work and play together successfully, in the American way”. By promoting racial equality prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Superman was fighting for those oppressed by American law. The “American way” in this instance does not connote unequivocal allegiance to the U.S. government, but rather the values for which America *should* stand. Despite contexts such as World War II and social pressures against comic books influencing pro-establishment ideas in many *Superman* texts, Superman’s role as champion of the oppressed therefore continued to inform his dominant role as champion of the “American way”. A clear transition from one sociopolitical alignment to another cannot be delineated in *Superman*’s history, while the “...American way” worded identifier can have different meanings depending on the context in which it is deployed.

We have seen Clark adopt a variety of roles, from meek coward to shrewd investigative reporter, and Superman ranging from champion of the underdog to protector of the U.S. government. Traits of the individual identities can metamorphose from incarnation to incarnation. Meanwhile, rather than Clark

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<sup>283</sup> Tye, *Superman*, p. 83.

and Superman existing as a binary, a permeability exists between the two identities, with traits of each appearing in the other. Different narrative configurations, often influenced by a medium's properties, can also resituate the identities in terms of dominance. For example, the emphasis on superhuman feats in *Action Comics #1* and the Fleischer Studios cartoons, and intergalactic scope of Silver Age comic book stories, situates Superman as the dominant identity. Conversely, the investigative structure and economic restrictions of the television series make Clark the dominant identity. Elements of form and narrative configurations effectively act as different colours on the Clark/Superman spectrum, pulling the identities toward different, sometimes competing, points. For example, with Reeves' Clark/Superman, intonation draws the identities closer together, while their distinct postures act as a competing factor, and the brains/brawn distinction gives both distinct heroic qualities. Any representation of Clark/Superman is a composite, formed through combining shades of each colour. Between the incarnations I have discussed there are a whole range of different Clarks and Supermen, each a unique configuration of shades of the various colours from the spectrum, occupying different positions in relation to one another.

Berger suggests that constant revisions of *Superman* in different media obscure and eventually disconnect earlier incarnations. He argues that Golden Age comic books were gradually nudged aside, as each incarnation in a new medium 'would further decentre Siegel and Shuster's privileged authority, eventually disconnecting their version of Superman entirely'.<sup>284</sup> However, the above analysis of *Superman* texts in the four decades following the character's creation has demonstrated that *Superman* does not develop along a simple chronological trajectory. Each incarnation engages in non-linear intertextual relations with an array of previous and contemporaneous incarnations. Looking at aesthetic interactions between texts and the ways residual traits of Clark/Superman from past incarnations recur or are reconfigured in later incarnations enables us to see that texts are never completely disconnected from a superhero's matrix. In fact, redeploying past incarnations in the

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<sup>284</sup> Berger, "Are There Any More at Home Like You?", p. 93.



current continuity canon became a strategy undertaken by DC in the 1960s. *Flash* #123 establishes a parallel dimension inhabited by the Golden Age incarnations of DC's superheroes.<sup>285</sup> It is designated that the Silver Age heroes inhabit Earth-One, the Golden Age ones Earth-Two. Team ups between Silver Age superhero team the Justice League of America and Golden Age team the Justice Society of America became an annual tradition.<sup>286</sup> Other dimensions were also introduced, such as that which includes Earth-Three, on which the Crime Syndicate of America, an evil version of the Justice League, live.<sup>287</sup> Different incarnations were thus not officially presented as separate entities, but rather as alternates existing together in a multiverse in which they could meet up, literalising the process of interaction between incarnations. The designation of numbers that effectively ranks the Earths also recalls the ways incarnations in a matrix are arranged in terms of centrality and marginality.

Bronze Age story 'Superman Takes a Wife!' is set on Earth-Two.<sup>288</sup> The story's infusion with traits not just from Golden Age *Superman* comic books, but also incarnations from other media, demonstrates that the multiversal conceit facilitates the continued circulation of elements from across the *Superman* matrix. The story resurrects details from very early Golden Age comic books, such as the newspaper Clark works for being the *Daily Star* and its editor George Taylor. Motifs from other incarnations are also prominent. The opening page deploys the introduction familiar from the radio serial and television series, starting "Superman – strange visitor from another planet..."<sup>289</sup> This familiar description is disrupted when "and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper..." is followed by "long ago decided there was one woman in the world he loved so deeply

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<sup>285</sup> Gardner Fox (w), Carmine Infantino (p), Joe Giella (i), et al. 'The Flash of Two Worlds', *The Flash* #123 (New York: DC Comics, 1961).

<sup>286</sup> This team up first occurred in a story spanning two issues, Gardner Fox (w), Mike Sekowsky (p) and Bernard Sachs (i), 'Crisis on Earth-One', *Justice League of America* #21 (August 1963) (repr. in Nick J. Napolitano (ed.), *Crisis on Multiple Earths* (New York: DC Comics, 2002), pp. 5-30); and Fox (w), Sekowsky (p) and Sachs (i), 'Crisis on Earth-Two', *Justice League of America* #22 (September 1963) (repr. in Napolitano (ed.), *Crisis on Multiple Earths*, pp. 31-56).

<sup>287</sup> The Crime Syndicate of America first featured in Fox (w), Sekowsky (p) and Sachs (i), 'Crisis on Earth-Three', *Justice League of America* #29 (August 1964) (repr. in Napolitano (ed.), *Crisis on Multiple Earths*, pp. 57-81).

<sup>288</sup> Cary Bates (w), Curt Swan (p) and Joe Giella (i), 'Superman Takes a Wife', *Action Comics* #484 (June 1978) (repr. in Wright, *Superman in the Seventies*, pp. 201-222).

<sup>289</sup> Note that the use of the word 'planet' instead of 'world' aligns this usage more directly with the television series.

that he had to have her by his side". The modification to the worded identifier announces a desire to reconfigure familiar traits.<sup>290</sup> Other elements from earlier incarnations include the use of the 'up in the sky...' worded identifier twice, an onlooker commenting on a whistling sound as Superman approaches, and Superman defeating bank robbing robots that distinctly recall the eponymous creations of Fleischer Studios cartoon *The Mechanical Monsters* (Dave Fleischer, 1941).<sup>291</sup> The story concerns a magic spell that erases the Superman identity, leaving Clark oblivious to his super-powered alter ego. Clark then becomes more heroic, cracking down on organised crime, brawling with gangsters and successfully romancing Lois. Positioning Clark as a tough crusader draws him closer to Superman while recalling the hard-edged aspects of Alyn and Reeves' Clarks. This tougher Clark is therefore rooted not just in the Superman of Golden Age comic books, but also in screen portrayals of Clark that by the Bronze Age of comics occupied a marginal position in the *Superman* matrix.

Narrative details, deployment of motifs and Clark's demeanour in 'Superman Takes a Wife' straddle incarnations of *Superman* in various media from the thirties, forties and fifties. This story, released months prior to *Superman: The Movie*, reveals that all these incarnations were still present in the *Superman* matrix when Superman was on the verge of being launched into his first blockbuster film.<sup>292</sup> Although these incarnations were decentred through being officially placed a secondary universe, motifs originating in them were still familiar and able to be reflected into new incarnations. *Superman: The Movie* had this whole matrix of incarnations, featuring a vivid spectrum of roles for Clark and Superman, on which to draw as it made a bid for centrality in the *Superman* matrix.

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<sup>290</sup> The modification and title of the story also suggest that, with the Golden Age continuity designated to a secondary universe, elements that were previously deemed fixed, such as Superman's seemingly eternal bachelor status, can be altered.

<sup>291</sup> The fact that onlookers indicate that these marauders have previously robbed banks suggests that these earlier crimes may even be those featured in *The Mechanical Monsters*, thereby positioning the Fleischer Studios cartoon in the Earth-Two continuity.

<sup>292</sup> 'Superman Takes a Wife!' was printed in *Action Comics* #484, dated June 1978, while *Superman: The Movie* was released in the U.S. in December 1978.

## Analysis of Superman: The Movie

### *Clark/Superman/Reeve*

As we have seen, the connections an incarnation of *Superman* forms with other incarnations in its presentation of Clark/Superman are a key means through which the incarnation's positioning within the *Superman* matrix is announced. Casting an unknown, Christopher Reeve, as Clark/Superman enabled *Superman: The Movie* to freely select traits from the Clark/Superman spectrum without having a star persona influencing audience perceptions of the character.<sup>293</sup> Reeve's Clark/Superman reconfigures traits from past incarnations to the effect that the film brings itself into the *Superman* matrix by signalling fidelity to earlier texts, while forging its own place within this space.

Reeve's Clark is introduced in the same sequence as Metropolis and the *Daily Planet*. A shot from within the *Daily Planet* offices is presented through a camera lens that searches the space. After pausing momentarily on extras, the lens arrives at Lois (Margot Kidder). The focus fluctuates, building anticipation until this new version of a famous

character is in sharp focus in close up, tossing her hair and smiling for the camera [Figure 19]. The reverse shot grants Jimmy (Marc McClure), the holder of the camera, a similarly typical introductory shot, his bowtie rooting him firmly in his dominant image from the



Figure 19 Lois smiles for the camera in *Superman: The Movie*

*Superman* matrix, as exemplified by Jack Larson's Jimmy in the television series, an incarnation which was so popular that 'his trademark bowtie is enshrined at the Smithsonian'.<sup>294</sup> Boss Perry (Jackie

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<sup>293</sup> Stars from Arnold Schwarzenegger to Muhammad Ali were reportedly considered for the role of Clark/Superman in *Superman: The Movie*, before it was decided that casting an unknown meant the character would not be dwarfed by the persona of a Hollywood icon. For a survey of the casting process, which details many of the stars that were considered for the role, see Jake Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood: How Fiendish Producers, Devious Directors, and Warring Writers Grounded an American Icon* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), pp. 74-83.

<sup>294</sup> Tye, *Superman*, p. 139. Tye explains that Jimmy was introduced in the radio series in 1940, and first featured in *Superman* comics nineteen months later (p. 104). These debuts are prefigured by an unnamed office boy, wearing a red bow tie, featuring in 'Superman's Phoney Manager', *Action Comics* #6 (November 1938).

Cooper) gets a comparable mid shot as Lois enters his office. Clark is conspicuous by his absence, and retains a degree of invisibility within the diegesis even once introduced. Rather than having an introductory shot, Clark emerges as the camera follows Perry to his desk. Perry offhandedly introduces Lois to Clark, who rises from a seat situated below the frame and reaches out to shake Lois' hand, only to be ignored.<sup>295</sup> The camera does not isolate and foreground Clark, who has to find his own way into the frame. Clark proceeds to glance around uneasily, shifting his eyebrows and pushing his glasses back with his finger, a gesture that George Reeves' Clark uses to assert genteel assuredness, but when performed by Christopher Reeve in this chain of fumbling gestures seems more like a nervous tic. Reeve's Clark's inability to demand the camera's full attention and his unassured gestures immediately establish the identity as awkward and timid.

Although Reeve's Clark has a meekness comparable to his Golden Age comic book counterparts, other elements of his cinematic presentation metamorphose his characterisation. Tye states that Reeve based his performance on a young Cary Grant: 'shy, vulnerable, and charmingly klutzy'.<sup>296</sup> Reeve's Clark is like the physically animated but psychologically fumbling Grant of *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), rather than Grant's verbally animated and self-assured newspaperman in *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940). After Clark fails to introduce himself, Lois and Perry engage in quick-fire discussion, their rapid vocal tempos recalling those of Grant and Rosalind Russell's sharp-witted journalists in *His Girl Friday*. Clark is side-lined during this exchange, comically straining to open a bottle before spraying the contents over himself, and stuttering like his Golden Age comic book counterpart. Meanwhile, his nasal intonation links him with incarnations of Clark whose voices are pitched higher than Superman's. When combined with his stuttering, Reeve's Clark's intonation is more boyish than that of any previous screen incarnation, wavering unsteadily as if his voice is breaking. This boyishness

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<sup>295</sup> The notion of Lois being essentially oblivious to Clark's existence, repeatedly failing to recognise that he is both Superman and in love with her, reaches its parodic culmination in the television adaptation of *It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman!*, which features a running joke about Lois (Lesley Ann Warren) literally being unable to see Clark, repeatedly forgetting that he is sat at the desk directly in front of her's.

<sup>296</sup> Tye, *Superman*, p. 198.

is enhanced by his vocabulary being peppered with antiquated words like ‘swell’ and ‘golly’. His full suit, tie and trilby recreate a look for Clark that is rooted in Golden Age comic books, and recurs in the Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons, film serials and television series.<sup>297</sup> *Superman: The Movie*’s Clark pointedly harkens back to the 1930/40s through combining traits from previous incarnations with performative elements that emulate a screen icon from classical Hollywood. While the Golden Age comic books’ Clark was presented as deplorably lacking in masculinity, Reeve’s Clark’s qualities connote wholesomeness. These connotations are evident in Lois’ pleasant astonishment and affectionate smile upon hearing that Clark sends half his weekly paycheque to his mother.

A range of alterations in gesture, posture and intonation differentiate Reeve’s Clark and Superman. These modifications occur in a matter of moments in a single shot that occurs immediately after Superman has flown Lois around the city, and Clark arrives at her apartment for a date. As Lois gets ready Clark stands timidly, head tilted downward, facial features somewhat strained [Figure 20]. He then expresses his heartfelt desire to tell Lois the truth by removing his glasses, revealing handsome dimples as a grin spreads across his face, puffing out his chest and standing

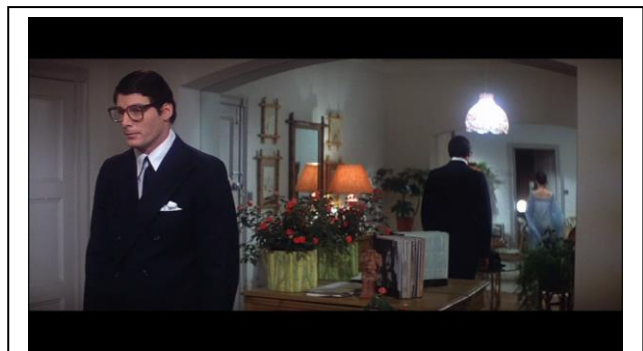


Figure 20 Clark waits for Lois in *Superman: The Movie*

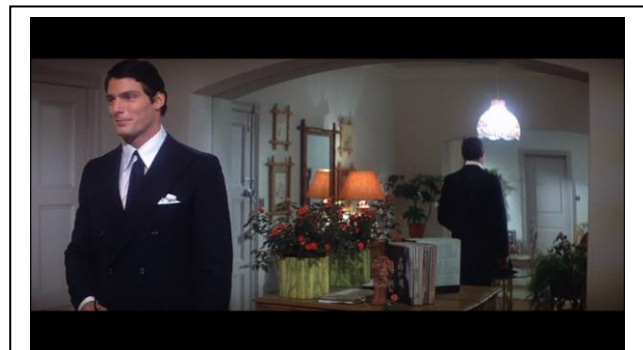


Figure 21 Clark shifts into Superman in *Superman: The Movie*

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<sup>297</sup> The fact that Clark has just spent twelve years in the Fortress of Solitude somewhat diegetically rationalises his antiquated vocabulary and attire. Clark’s attire contrasts the *Daily Planet*’s other male journalists in *Superman: The Movie*, who generally sport contemporary 1970s fashions, such as lightly coloured suits and wide-collar shirts with long points. Despite Clark’s attire recreating a popular look from the *Superman* matrix, it should be noted that contemporaneous Bronze Age comics were replacing this look with a style rooted in 1970s fashions, dropping the trilby and granting Clark a wardrobe of different coloured suits and shirts. In opting for a the more traditional look, which is also evident in the outdated fashions of central characters Lois, Perry and Jimmy, *Superman: The Movie* seeks to embed nostalgia within its contemporary setting.

straight so that his head brushes the top of the frame [Figure 21]. He exhales before announcing in his deep Superman voice “Lois, there’s something I have to tell you, I’m really...”. As Lois returns he backtracks; replaces the glasses, shrinks and resumes Clark’s nasal tones. The continuous movement in which the transformation occurs in this shot reflects the mid-sentence vocal dip from earlier incarnations and flowing motion of the animated silhouette in the Fleischer/Famous Studios cartoons. As with these other strategies, the graceful alterations that occur in a single shot convey the sense that the change in identities is not switch, but a shift. The mirror in the background of this shot, while acting as a narrative device that allows the audience to watch for Lois’ return, further suggests duality. Just as incarnations of Superman act as reflections of one another, so do the Clark and Superman identities. The first time the audience is shown a full transformation, including costume change, from Clark to Superman, further reconfigurations of previously used motifs are evident. As Lois hangs in peril from a skyscraper rooftop, Clark initiates the transformation by running toward the fourth wall and pulling open his shirt to reveal the iconic ‘S’ symbol on the superhero costume underneath, which fills the frame by the end of the shot. This shot thus transitions from a momentary midpoint between identities that recreates the kinds of imagery found in the panel from *Action Comics* #1 discussed earlier, to an iconic motif that signifies the Superman identity.<sup>298</sup>

The next shot offers the reverse angle as Clark/Superman enters a revolving door, whizzes it around, and re-emerges fully clad as Superman. The motion blur created in the whirl, whereby the figure within the revolving doors is indistinguishable as he changes, is a reflection of the motion lines used to connect figures in the panel from *Superman* #233 discussed earlier. Clark/Superman’s abstracted transformation, seen only in a blur through moving glass, recalls the silhouette motif from the Fleischer/Famous studios cartoons. The whirling sound of the doors augments the motion blur’s denotation of speed, similarly to how the whistling that signifies Superman’s flight in various

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<sup>298</sup> Brownie and Graydon emphasise how a superhero’s symbol, or ‘insignia’, as they call it, ‘has become a shorthand for the whole costume’, embodying the superhero’s identity and values. Brownie and Graydon, *The Superhero Costume*, p, 19.

incarnations acts as an aural reflection of motion lines. When Superman emerges fully attired and takes flight a sharper whooshing noise than in previous incarnations is used to signify greater velocity. Numerous strategies from previous incarnations are thus combined and metamorphosed to create a smooth transition from one identity to the other in continuous movements. Although each strategy has antecedents, their fresh metamorphosis grants the transformation a fluidity not seen before in live-action.

Reeve's Clark's mild nature is evident in his Superman's gentleness, as exemplified in the superhero's first encounter with Lois. After Superman catches Lois as she falls from the skyscraper they are framed face-to-face [Figure 22]. While offering a

literal reflection of the panel that depicted their meeting in *Action Comics* #1 through having the characters occupying opposite sides, the effect is also modified. The composition is much more balanced than in the panel. Although Superman is still inches taller than Lois he does not encroach on her



Figure 22 Superman and Lois' first meeting in *Superman: The Movie*

side of the frame. Instead of threats and grimaces, he offers comforting words and smiles, stating "easy Miss, I've got you". When they land, Superman is shot from a low angle, Lois a high one, encapsulating his power, but rather than feel threatened and retreat, Lois gazes wide-eyed in wonder as Superman jokes about flying being the safest form of travel. He then enigmatically introduces himself as "a friend" and flies away. By acting with warmth and humility, Reeve's Superman is drawn into close proximity with his mild mannered Clark.

Reeve's Clark/Superman thus harkens back to the era of the character's genesis, and forges links with an array of incarnations from across the Clark/Superman spectrum, yet also claims his own place on the spectrum. While eliciting nostalgia for the thirties and forties, Reeve's Clark/Superman is a far cry

from the deplorably meek Clark and hyper-masculine Superman in *Action Comics* #1. Reeve's Clark takes characteristics from mild mannered incarnations, but resituates these qualities as wholesome. His Superman, rather than appearing as Clark's diametrical opposite, takes on Clark's traits, upon which they come to epitomise heroism. Superman himself thus becomes mild mannered! While the Supermen from Golden Age comic books and *Superman: The Movie* may have largely antithetical characteristics, they are not situated as binaries but rather placed at opposite ends of the spectrum. They are still connected, both by direct gestures to the comics in the film and through the numerous exchanges they enact with a shared matrix of intertexts released in the forty years by which they are separated.

*Superman: The Movie's* efforts to avoid explicit politicisation of Superman further place its superhero at odds with the Golden Age champion of the oppressed. In fact, Superman's nostalgic connotations facilitate the film's avoidance of contemporary sociopolitical concerns.<sup>299</sup> This conceptualisation of nostalgia's function conforms to archetypal theoretical understandings of nostalgia. In the next chapter, I will explore alternative ways to theorise nostalgia that facilitate more complex readings of superhero films' sociopolitical affiliations. The significant thing to note now is what Reeve's Superman's lack of explicit politicisation contributes to my discussion of the film's arrangement of the *Superman* matrix. The film's loving recreation of elements from past incarnations at once draw it into alignment with these texts while contributing to its distinct set of meanings. Nostalgia for past incarnations engenders a lack of the kind of political engagement these incarnations often exhibited.

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<sup>299</sup> Contemporary concerns of post-Vietnam and post-Watergate U.S are only gestured to once. When Superman utters the famous worded identifier, telling Lois that he is "here to fight for truth, justice and the American way", she laughs in disbelief and retorts "you're gonna end up fighting every elected official in this country". Superman chuckles slightly and says "surely you don't really mean that Lois?", before sincerely assuring her that he never lies. Considering Superman's characterisation, it could be argued that values he embodies of warmth, gentleness and empathy are being promoted as the heroic qualities for which the 'American way' should stand. Conversely, it could be argued that Reeve's Superman functions to placate society's unrest by acting as a reassuring embodiment of the U.S. establishment, and concealing the establishment's true nature behind a wholesome, innocuous exterior.



This pattern of evoking previous incarnations while in the same movie diverting from them manifests in a range of other ways throughout the film.

### *Remediating Comics Form*

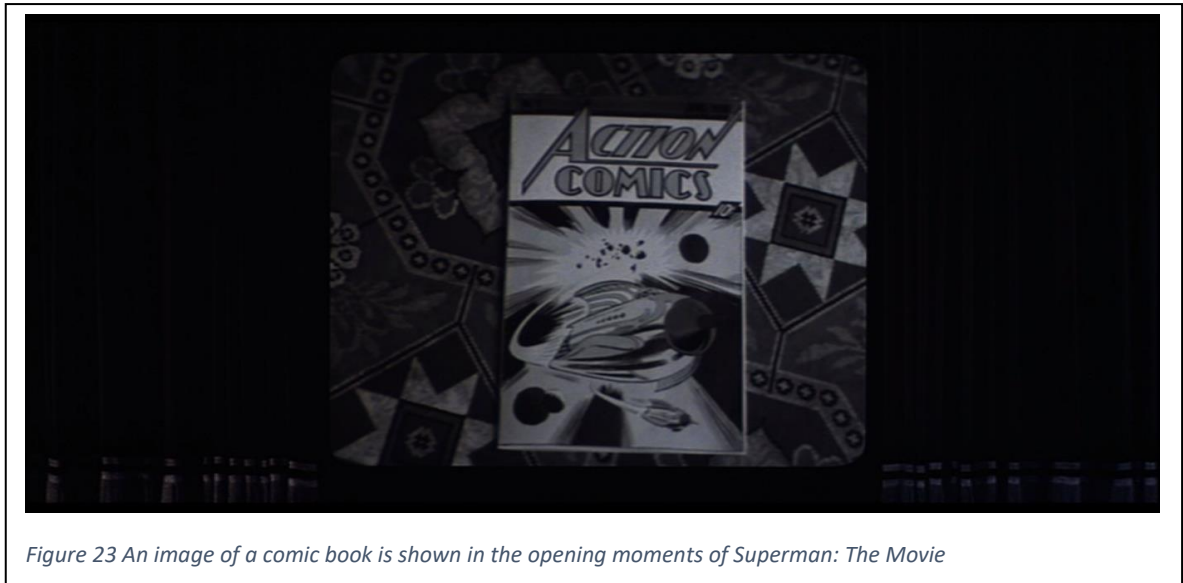
*Superman: The Movie* opens on a black and white image of curtains, which open to reveal a 4:3 frame on which the title 'June 1938' appears and then fades out before an image of a comic titled 'Action Comics' fades in [Figure 23]. These opening moments immediately gesture to Superman's comic book heritage, presenting both the cover date and title of the comic in which the character first appeared. Thomas Leitch identifies cues in novel to film adaptations that 'encourage filmgoers to experience adaptations as adaptations, even if they know nothing of the source'.<sup>300</sup> These motifs mark out adaptations as a broad genre unto themselves. One of the cues that Leitch discusses is 'an obsession with authors, books and words'.<sup>301</sup> For example, adaptations often refer to their adapted novel's author in their title (e.g. *Mary Shelly's Frankenstein* (Kenneth Branagh, 1994)), while 'every filmgoer is familiar with the credits that appear as the magically turning pages of a book, a trope that aims to give the adaptation the authority of the book itself'.<sup>302</sup> *Superman: The Movie's* opening transfers this trope of presenting images of the adapted medium to the comic to film adaptation.

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<sup>300</sup> Thomas Leitch, 'Adaptation, the Genre', *Adaptation*, 1:2 (2008), p. 111.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.



Burke demonstrates that similarities between the visual configurations available to comics and film have caused evocations of comics to become a far more omnipresent and multifaceted aesthetic strategy in comic book adaptations, creating what he terms a ‘comic aesthetic’ in film.<sup>303</sup> This aesthetic is formed through self-reflexive recreations of comics form, such as overlaying images with written onomatopoeia, along with more discreet deployment of comics’ presentational strategies, such as framing and composing scenes according to the principles typically followed by superhero comic books.<sup>304</sup> However, as noted in my review of literature, due to Burke’s focus on the potential of film to emulate comics he does not probe the new meanings that are created in this process of metamorphosis. Below, I will explore ways in which *Superman: The Movie*’s evocations of comic book form elicit nostalgia for early incarnations and situate them within the matrix, while simultaneously creating new meanings and seeking to push *Superman: The Movie* to the centre of the matrix.

Before undertaking this analysis, it is useful to establish a unifying term for describing the aesthetic strategies through which comic book adaptations gesture to their adapted medium. Jay David Bolter

<sup>303</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*. Burke’s detailed analysis of the ‘comic aesthetic’ can be found on pp. 169-262.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.* For Burke’s discussion of the deployment of onomatopoeia, see p. 202. For his discussion of framing and composition, see pp. 230-236.

and Richard Grusin's concept of 'remediation' provides such a term.<sup>305</sup> Bolter and Grusin use 'remediation' to describe the ongoing process in which all active media in a society are engaged in dialogue with one another. Bolter and Grusin present this process as evincing an 'unimpeded flow' between media.<sup>306</sup> However, while intermedial dialogue is enabled by the formal relations I have been outlining between media, the analysis undertaken by Elliott and myself demonstrates that distinctions between forms and media engender not unimpeded flow, but reflection and metamorphosis. The process of remediation can also manifest as a specific aesthetic strategy; 'the representation of one medium in another'.<sup>307</sup> Bolter and Grusin's usage of remediation to describe an aesthetic strategy in which one medium evokes another usefully encompasses the shared function a variety of different devices perform in comic book adaptations. However, it is important to note that I am only adopting the term to bring together these devices. I am not also subscribing to Bolter and Grusin's understanding of open exchange between media.

One strategy of remediation that Burke identifies in comic book adaptations is the use of bright colours and colour pops (in which a certain colour commands attention through its vivid shade contrasting other colours in a composition) to recall the solid primary colours that were replete in early American comics, and with which comics is still largely culturally associated.<sup>308</sup> This strategy is prominent throughout *Superman: The Movie*, but integrated into the film's particular stylistic schema. Tom Mankiewicz, credited as the film's 'creative consultant', discusses how the film was designed to pass through three distinct styles:

It's shot in three styles. It's written in three styles. On Krypton, everything is shot through a fog filter. It's white. It's cold. And they speak in almost mock Shakespearean English. Then, when they get to Smallville, where he's growing up, everything is shot in pastels like Norman Rockwell. The dialogue is, "Hey, ma and pa," and "gosh." Then, when you get to Metropolis,

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<sup>305</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

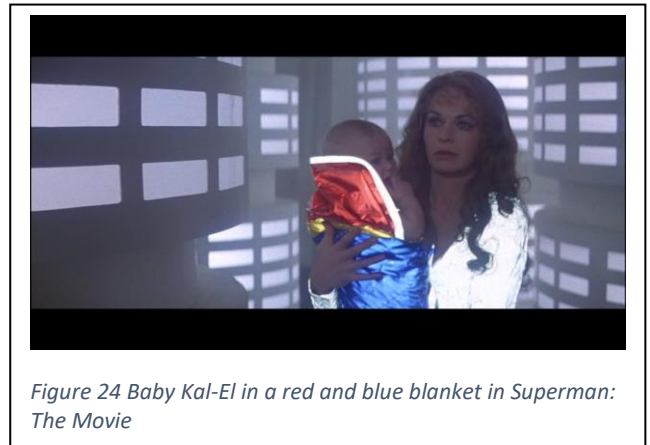
<sup>308</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, pp. 209-212.

bang, there are the red reds and the green greens, and it's Lex Luthor, and the lines are flying. It was always designed that way.<sup>309</sup>

Mankiewicz outlines markedly different colour schemes for each key segment/location: Krypton, Smallville and Metropolis.

Bright colours with iconic resonance in *Superman: The Movie* function not only to gesture to comics, but also to create consistency between the film's distinctly coloured sections. The opening section on Krypton presents stark contrasts of bright whites and dark greys. Krypton's crystalline design does not itself comprise of primary colours, but rather provides a white backdrop, like the paper of a comic book, against which the selectively deployed vivid colours can prominently pop.<sup>310</sup> The first instance of

vivid colour within Krypton's interiors is the red and blue blanket that contains baby Clark/Superman (Lee Quigley), at this point known by his Kryptonian name, Kal-El [Figure 24]. This pronounced colour pop does not just remediate comics in general, but recalls the specific iconography of Superman's costume,



<sup>309</sup> Tom Mankiewicz and Robert Crane. *My Life as a Mankiewicz: An Insider's Journey through Hollywood* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012), p. 199. The role of creative consultant was invented for Mankiewicz for the credits of *Superman: The Movie*, as he not only did the final re-writes on the scripts for *Superman: The Movie* and *Superman II* but also, in his own words, 'stayed on [both films] for over a year and a half through the casting, the editing, the scoring, the location scouting' (p. 218).

<sup>310</sup> There are precedents for this crystalline design in the *Superman* matrix. For example, in 'Superman's Return to Krypton' (Jerry Siegel (w), Wayne Boring (p) and Stan Kaye (i), 'Superman's Return to Krypton', *Superman* #141 (November 1960) (repr. in Crain (ed.), *Superman in the Sixties*, pp. 38-63). Krypton is home to many natural wonders, one of these being the Jewel Mountains, on which brightly coloured jewels shimmer from icy white peaks. Elsewhere, the narration for an episode of the radio serial that recounts Superman's origins states "as we near Krypton we see high walls and gleaming turrets. We approach the magnificent temple of wisdom with its dome of pure crystal shimmering like a diamond in the sun" ('The Meteor from Krypton: Part 2', broadcast 25-09-45). The fact that the affiliation of Krypton with crystalline design developed into the *Superman* matrix is apparent in the absence of this description from the very first episode of the radio serial, with the narration simply stating "as we near Krypton we see high walls and gleaming turrets, we approach the magnificent temple of wisdom" ('The Baby from Krypton', broadcast 12-02-40). An early text to feature such design is the 1942 novel. The opening lines of the novel read '[t]he great hall of Krypton's magnificent Temple of Wisdom was a blaze of light. Countless chandeliers of purest crystal reflected the myriad lights into a dome of glass where they were shattered into a million fragments and fell dazzling over the Great Hall' (Lowther, *The Adventures of Superman*, p. 3).

thus signalling to the audience that this baby is the hero in his youth. Another iconic colour from the *Superman* matrix is deployed when a glowing green crystal is placed in Kal-El's cradle. While *Superman: The Movie's* Krypton is predominantly white, elsewhere in the matrix it is largely associated with green, this being the colour of kryptonite, the radioactive fragments of Krypton that pose a great threat to Superman.<sup>311</sup> The iconic resonance of this colour means that its placement next to Kal-El foreshadows the dangers Clark/Superman will encounter on Earth.<sup>312</sup>

Once the film's colour scheme changes from the extreme light and dark contrasts of Krypton to the pastels of Smallville, the continued signification of Clark/Superman with bright red and blue enables audiences to track the character into this new space and as he ages in ellipses. When John (Glenn Ford)

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<sup>311</sup> Kryptonite's iconic status has been forged through an interaction between different points on the *Superman* matrix throughout the character's history. Tye discusses an unpublished *Superman* story from 1940 by Siegel that introduced a substance called K-Metal that could render Superman powerless (*Superman*, pp. 49-50). Tye hypothesises that the reason this story was never published was that it altered a formula that was proving massively successful, and therefore in no need of change. Another alteration the story made to the formula was having Superman reveal his identity to Lois. With the K-Metal script filed away, the radio serial introduced kryptonite to the *Superman* matrix in 1943, in a storyline titled 'The Meteor from Krypton'. Although radio is not a visual medium, the colour of kryptonite was designated as glowing green. To signify its presence and convey its radioactivity kryptonite emits a hum, which characters often comment on, with the villainous Scarlet Widow calling it the "sound of power" ('The Scarlet Widow: Part 4', broadcast date 02-10-45). While kryptonite does not hum when it appears in the film serials, the trait was not lost from the matrix, as it does emit a soft humming in *Superman: The Movie*. Kryptonite first appeared in comics in *Superman* #61 (William Woolfolk (w) and Al Plastino (a), 'Superman Returns to Krypton', *Superman* #61, (New York: DC Comics, November 1949), in which its colour is red. Tye notes that in subsequent comics it was grey, before it became fixed at green (*Superman*, p. 172). However, while the regular form of kryptonite that provided the only substance that could kill Superman remained as green, a whole spectrum of other colours were introduced in Silver Age comics. Tye summarises: 'Gold kryptonite robbed Superman of the powers that made him super. Blue was dangerous only to creatures from the Bizarro world, while the only life that white kryptonite could take was a plant's. Red-green was Brainiac's idea, and the combination was a double edged-sword: It gave Superman an eye he didn't need on the back of his head, but it provided him the extra heat vision he needed to lick the computer genius. Red-gold gave the hero temporary amnesia. Red kryptonite was Mort's favourite threat: it was able to split Superman in two or turn him into an ant. While its effects were unpredictable, as with anything Weisinger-related there were rules: Each scarlet-tinted piece had a unique impact, it worked on Superman just once, and its fallout lasted at most forty-eight hours' (*Superman*, pp. 172-173). The various colours of kryptonite therefore provide a literal spectrum through which vivid possibilities for Superman can be explored. These vivid refractions through the spectrum ceased in Bronze Age comics, with the first storyline under Schwartz's editorship being Kryptonite Nevermore, in which all kryptonite on earth is rendered inert (Denny O'Neil (w), Curt Swan (p), Murphy Anderson (i), et al., 'Kryptonite Nevermore', *Superman* #233-242 (New York: DC Comics, January 1971-September 1971)). However, within Schwartz's editorship kryptonite would return to the comics. Different colours of kryptonite also resurface in other incarnations, such as *Smallville* (The WB/The CW, 2001-2011) in which, for example, red robs Kent of his inhibitions and moral compass (this is comparable to the effect of the artificially manufactured Kryptonite in *Superman III*), while blue renders him powerless.

<sup>312</sup> It should be noted that this crystal is not in fact kryptonite, and is actually used later in the film to construct the fortress of solitude, in which Clark/Superman learns of his Kryptonian heritage.

and Martha Kent (Phyllis Thaxter) discover the young Clark/Superman (Aaron Smolinski), his red blanket is evident at the crash site and subsequently tied around his waist.<sup>313</sup> In the following scene the child has aged into a teenager (Jeff East), but the fact that he is the only character wearing a bright red shirt makes him easy for the audience to pick out when first seen in an establishing shot of a football field [Figure 25].<sup>314</sup>



Figure 25 Teenage Clark in a red shirt in *Superman: The Movie*

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<sup>313</sup> In some other incarnations the material from which this blanket is made is also carried over into Metropolis, with Ma Kent creating Superman's costume out of the blanket's material, which due to its Kryptonian origin bears a comparable strength to Superman and therefore rationalises why Superman's outfit is so durable. This occurs in the first episode of the film serial, with Ma Kent (Virginia Carroll) stating "here's a uniform I made for you out of blanket you were wrapped in when we found you. It's a strange kind of cloth that resists both fire and acid".

<sup>314</sup> This device becomes a key motif in *Smallville* in which, despite the show's fundamental rule that it chronicles Clark's life before he becomes Superman, and can therefore not have him wearing the outfit (Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, p. 253), Clark's wardrobe is full of red and blue clothes. His most frequent outfit is a red jacket over a blue shirt, mimicking the red cape over blue costume. In season eight, when he starts working at the *Daily Planet* and wearing smart clothes to work, he changes into the red jacket and blue shirt before performing heroic acts. This outfit therefore became the garb of his superhero alter ego, which comes to be known, within the diegesis, as the 'Red-Blue Blur', in recognition of the iconic power of the colours. In season nine he changes his superhero outfit to black trousers, black t-shirt and black trench coat, and as such simply becomes known as the 'Blur'. However, the 'S' symbol, in white, is on the t-shirt, and he imprints this symbol at the scenes of his feats, thereby perpetuating the iconography within the diegesis. The fact that the combination of red and blue can be interchangeable with the 'S' symbol reveals how they are each equally potent as iconic signifiers of Superman. In season ten, the Blur's outfit changes again to a dark red leather jacket with the 'S' symbol on the chest over a blue t-shirt. This outfit combines the iconography of the colours and the symbol, providing the penultimate step before Clark dons a more traditional Superman costume, complete with chest symbol and red cape, and takes on the name Superman, at the end of the series.

In Metropolis, Clark/Superman inhabits much more crowded environments. While, as discussed earlier, Clark struggles to assert himself in this space, Superman is clearly identifiable in his version of the iconic red and blue costume. The vivid colours Mankiewicz ascribes to Metropolis are supplied by various forms of artificial light, such as neon signs and flashing police lights. Amongst these flashing and glowing colours, the blocks of colour that make up Superman's costume stand out due to their different consistency.<sup>315</sup> Superman's colours are a solid, assuredly fixed presence amidst the dazzling but ephemeral lights of the modern city.

Remediating the spatial properties of comics is another way that *Superman: The Movie* recalls the medium of comics in general. Burke and Jochen Ecke both analyse techniques through which film can recall the spatial properties of comics.<sup>316</sup> Creating frames for images that recall comics panels and segmenting shots to emulate juxtaposed panels, either through scene composition or split screen editing, are key strategies. Burke and Ecke explore the new kinds of formal configurations these strategies inspire in film that, in Ecke's words, 'enrich the cinematic language'.<sup>317</sup> However, what is also of significance when spatial properties of comics are remediated in *Superman: The Movie* are the ways in which spatial properties of cinema are simultaneously asserted.

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<sup>315</sup> Brightly coloured lights manufactured on Earth can also be linked to Krypton's iconography, as suggested by General Zod (Terence Stamp) in *Superman II* when he comments, in regard to the light on a police car, "I like the glow that flashes red like Krypton's sun".

<sup>316</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, p. 182-189; Jochen Ecke, 'Spatializing the Movie Screen: How Mainstream Cinema is Catching Up on the Formal Potentialities of the Comic Book Page' in Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke and Gideon Haberkorn (ed.), *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010), pp. 7-20.

<sup>317</sup> Ecke, 'Spatializing the Movie Screen', p. 19.

One instance of comics panels being remediated in *Superman: The Movie* occurs when Kryptonian criminals General Zod (Terence Stamp), Ursa (Sarah Douglas) and Non (Jack O'Halloran) are imprisoned in the Phantom Zone. A square descending from space and entraps the trio. As it ascends its prisoners are pressed against the surface

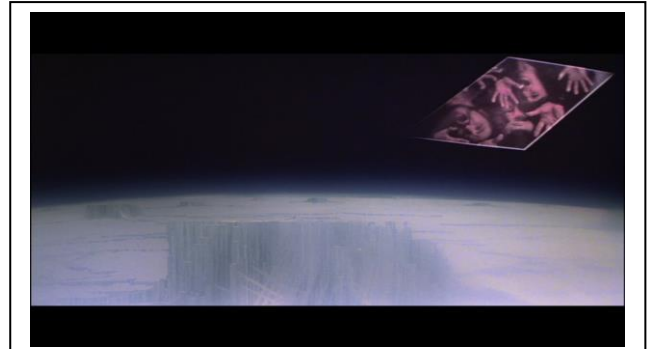


Figure 26 Zod, Ursa and Non trapped in the Phantom Zone in *Superman: The Movie*

criying out for freedom [Figure 26]. The rotations of this square emphasise its two-dimensionality, since when it is turned ninety degrees to the screen it becomes indistinguishable. It functions as a frame-within-the-frame with a flatness that likens it to a sheet of paper. Thus, film's ability to present movement outlines parallels between the square and a comics panel, while through doing so it contrasts comics' two-dimensionality against three-dimensional cinematic space.

Elsewhere in the film, the *Daily Planet* offices are frequently segmented into units that subtly recall juxtaposed comics panels.<sup>318</sup> While with the presentation of the Phantom Zone the movement of the "panel" itself emphasises differences between comics and film, in the *Daily Planet* scenes it is the ways characters inhabit and move through segmented space that are significant. Sheets of glass, shelving units and separating boards fragment the office floor. This design distinguishes the space from the newspaper offices in *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976), which would have provided a contemporary point of reference for audiences, in which geometrically lined up desks stretch back to the far walls. Glass sheets are arranged like strips in a comic when Perry rationalises his hiring of Clark to Lois. The panes of windows mark out three units, or panels, across the screen [Figure 27]. Clark

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<sup>318</sup> See Ecke's discussion of the Bungalow in *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003) for another example of the interior a building in a film being constructed like a comic. Ecke states that '[p]roduction designer Rick Heinrichs refashions the bungalow as though it were a gigantic, three-dimensional comic book to be roamed at will: the structure seems to consist of nothing but frames or panels, all of which culminate in a highly symbolic empty panel, the door behind which Banner's mother was murdered'. Ecke, 'Spatializing the Movie Screen', p. 19.



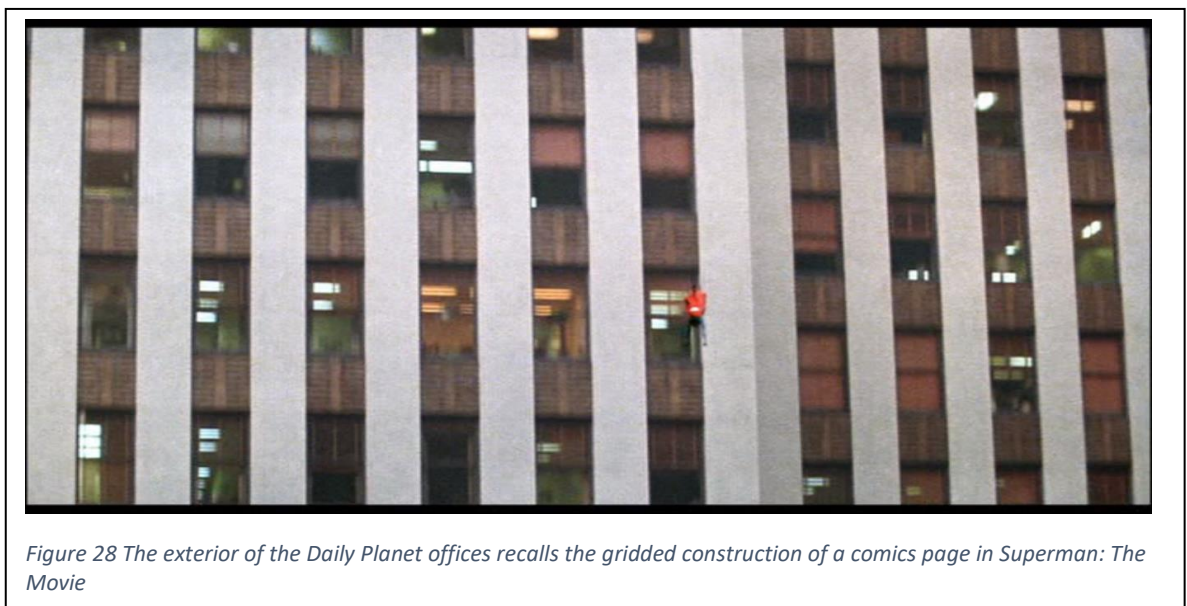
stands behind the leftmost pane, Lois and Perry in front of the middle one, while the rightmost is empty apart from extras. Positioning characters behind or in front of these panels creates a layering that adds depth to the horizontal strip. This layering contributes to characterisation with, for example, Clark's situation behind the pane emphasising his mild-mannered persona in contrast to the more bullish Perry and Lois. Layering continues to be emphasised as characters move in and out of Perry's office through a pair of swinging glass doors, the camera cutting from one side of the panes to the other. These movements add further narrative meaning; Lois confidently strides through the door, knocking it into an emasculated Clark. Meanwhile, the extra-diegetic discourse regarding the dimensionality of comics and film continues as characters do not just pass from one unit to the next along a two-dimensional axis, but move between positions in front of and behind these units.



Figure 27 Windows in Perry's office recall a strip from a comic in *Superman: The Movie*

The most pointed instance of a character moving between the space in front of and the space behind a "panelled" unit occurs when Clark/Superman exits the *Daily Planet* offices through a window part-way up the building. The camera tracks along from outside the building, following Clark walking through the office while Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman) broadcasts on a wavelength that only Clark/Superman can hear. The bricks between each window act like a comic's gutter, blank spaces between units concealing pieces of movement that we do not see but understand to be happening. Each of the windows presents a different composition, with the office staff relatively stationary, as if

suspended in still panels, as Clark walks through. The camera itself passes through the depth of this space upon moving backward when Clark perches on a window before dropping out and changing into Superman whilst falling. A subsequent very long shot of the building's exterior as Superman flies away emphasises its gridded construction [Figure 28]. This scene thus foregrounds ways in which Superman's powers enable him to negotiate physical structures in ways impossible to humans, and film's kinetic properties enable it to present space in ways impossible to comics. Diegetic and extra-diegetic meaning reciprocally enforce each other.



Remediations of the spatial properties of comics in *Superman: The Movie* function not just to gesture to the medium in which the superhero originated, but also to rearticulate the qualities of familiar characters and showcase the properties of film. These scenes express reverence for comics, while their emphasis on the three-dimensionality of cinematic space and film's capacity to present movement simultaneously assert film as a superior medium. Movement through the depth of cinematic space is in fact the governing principle of a spatial motif used throughout *Superman: The Movie* to situate the film as the most spectacular incarnation in the *Superman* matrix.

### *Head-on Propulsion*

As observed earlier, Superman's first comic book adventure in *Action Comics #1* foregrounds Superman himself. From the striking cover image of Superman smashing a car to the opening page that explains

his abilities and presentations of his feats throughout the story, this new character and the figure of the superhero is foregrounded and introduced to audiences. *Superman: The Movie* takes a markedly different approach. Forty years after *Action Comics* #1, the superhero was a widely recognisable icon of popular culture, while various incarnations of *Superman* had constructed a vast network of familiar elements. *Superman* was no longer just a character, but a whole fictional universe. The film's commitment to realising this universe is suggested immediately by the fact that the cover of *Action Comics* in the opening does not feature the iconic image of Superman smashing a car, but instead depicts a rocket blasting away from an exploding planet. Movements of characters and camera that penetrate the depth of the spaces that comprise the film's universe present this universe as a spectacular re-envisioning of Superman's mythology, replete with breadth and wonders.

This motif for traversing space is introduced in the film's opening minutes. After the camera draws toward the comic, the image dissolves into a black and white shot of the *Daily Planet* offices. The camera proceeds to move beyond the globe atop these offices, glides upward past the moon and into space, then vivid blue credits soar toward the screen and the curtains framing the images open fully. Burke observes, in a footnote, that through this move from comic book imagery to imagery that he argues recalls film serials, and then to colour and widescreen framing, the film proclaims its transcendence of *Superman's* previous forms.<sup>319</sup> However, Burke does not follow this line of enquiry further. By passing through media in which *Superman* has previously featured, over a globe and upward into space, the movement quite literally announces that the film is going beyond the world envisioned in earlier incarnations. The names of the film's two most bankable film stars, Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman, burst toward the fourth wall, while astrological stars recede into the background. Geoff King discusses star presence as a form of spectacle that has existed throughout Hollywood's history: 'the star might be consumed as a form of spectacle: an audio visual spectacle in its own right'.<sup>320</sup> The names

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<sup>319</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, p. 292. Burke argues that the qualities of the imagery that recall film serials are its 4:3 aspect ratio, 'black and white aesthetic and dated model work'.

<sup>320</sup> Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 181.

of these Hollywood stars are juxtaposed against the stars and vastness of space, the two forms of spectacle suggesting that the film will be of grandiose proportions in every respect. The sequence's trajectories are subsequently inverted, with credits receding back from the fourth wall and stars moving toward it, as if the audience is being propelled forward through space. The disorientating reversal of direction suggests that this journey leads to unknown territory, while the sheer length of the credits (roughly four minutes) implies a journey that covers a great distance. If, as discussed in my review of literature, comic books convey time through spatial construction, the opening credits of *Superman: The Movie* invert this trait by using time as one of the means through which the crossing of an incomprehensibly large spatial distance is implied.

The journey through space concludes upon locating Krypton. As the viewer is guided toward a white dome atop a shimmering city Brando's authoritative voice announces "this is no fantasy, no careless product of wild imagination". While he is referring to the charges held against Zod, Ursa and Non, the words also assert the status of the film. Though numerous shots and various special effects have taken us here, the progression through the depth of cinematic and actual space gives the impression of one long, fluid journey from the comics page to this spectacle of alien architecture. We have travelled from the juvenile origins of the comic book hero to a universe that is no longer mere "wild imagination", but is lavishly realised and carries the weight of Brando's solemn intonation.<sup>321</sup>

It is important to acknowledge Brando's contemporary status as one of Hollywood's most prominent stars.<sup>322</sup> The spectacle of Brando's larger than life persona and presence accentuates the film's

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<sup>321</sup> It is later revealed by Lex that Krypton exploded in 1948, thereby giving an actual time frame for the journey as ten diegetic years. Kal-El's subsequent journey to Earth lasts three years, there is an ellipse between his youth and high school, and he spends twelve years in the fortress of solitude before emerging as Superman into a contemporary Metropolis. Mapping out its temporal progression so precisely is a way in which the film announces that, while in 1938 *Superman* comics were aimed at children, the character has grown throughout the years with his audience to inhabit the here and now.

<sup>322</sup> Rossen describes Brando as the 'biggest of stars' at this time in his career, and explains that the production of *Superman: The Movie* was flailing until Brando was hired. Brando's position of primacy within the film therefore mirrors his primacy in the production, as the first actor to commit to the film. His participation, along with his highly publicised salary of '\$3.7 million and a percentage of the gross', also gained the film a great deal of publicity, and set new precedents for stars' salaries in Hollywood (Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, p. 66). Examples of Brando's celebrated roles in this era include Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford

grandeur while grounding the elaborate opening gestures in a highly acclaimed star. This strategy acts as another metamorphosis of Superman's comic book origin as, while *Action Comics #1* grounds the fantastic figure of Superman in a familiar urban milieu, Brando acts as a familiar anchor for the fantastic universe in *Superman: The Movie*.<sup>323</sup>

While used to showcase the film's universe, trajectories through the depth of cinematic space are also used to present the special ways in which the eponymous hero inhabits this universe. David Bordwell observes that projecting movement toward the camera has been a popular strategy in film since the medium's early years: '[f]rom Lumière's train onward, depth-through-movement characteristically presented action coming from back to front, and this proved a very advantageous schema. Movement toward the camera is perceptually salient simply as movement'.<sup>324</sup> The strategy emphasises the depth of cinematic space through having objects and characters move from the back to the front of this space, and directs audience attention to said object or character. While comics use spatial devices to indicate movements that guide readers through panels and pages, films harness their capacity to stage movement through the depth of space to direct viewer attention within takes. Movement provides a key force for managing audience engagement with narrative in both media, but has distinct qualities in each. *Superman: The Movie's* use of movement foregrounds these differences. For example, the strategy of framing movement through the depth of space is used when teenage Clark races a train. The scene is initially presented side-on, as a recreation of the panel from the opening page of the first

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Coppola, 1972), for which he won an Oscar, and Paul in *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972), for which he was nominated for an Oscar.

<sup>323</sup> The impression Brando made on the character and the superhero genre more broadly, and the concurrent impression the character had on Brando's persona, is evident in the playful remoulding of Brando's Jor-El in *Megamind* (Tom McGrath, 2010). *Megamind's* subversion of the superhero genre uses *Superman* as its main reference point, inverting conventions so that the supervillain Megamind (Will Ferrell), upon apparently killing the Superman surrogate, Metro Man (Brad Pitt), must become a hero to defeat a villain of his own creation, Tighthen (Jonah Hill). Megamind initially tries to craft Tighthen into a new superhero to become his nemesis, and to mentor Tighthen in the ways of superheroics disguises himself as a figure that pointedly resembles Brando's Jor-El, although his voice emulates Brando's portrayal of Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather*. This fusion of two of Brando's performances acknowledges the complex range of reference points that form a star's public image, and outlines the ways in which Brando's prominent roles as patriarchal figures in his later career feed into each other and enforce the potency of these characters in individual films.

<sup>324</sup> David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 171.

*Superman* comic book story in which Clark races a train along a horizontal trajectory.<sup>325</sup> As Clark overtakes the train and turns to run toward the railway crossing, the film cross cuts between shots of Clark and the train racing toward the camera. The film thus shifts from recreating a comics panel to recreating the shot of a train racing toward the screen in the opening of the television series, which itself is intertextually rooted in the famous footage from *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1896) that Bordwell references. The train is then contrasted with imagery of Clark adopting the train's trajectory. By gesturing to familiar motifs from the *Superman* matrix, but metamorphosing them through redeploying the motif of propulsion through the depth of cinematic space, the film rearticulates in intensified form Clark/Superman's alignment with, and surpassing of, the industrial age's achievements. Furthermore, through recalling famous imagery from cinematic history, and inserting Clark into this imagery, the film situates itself as a new milestone in the evolution of cinema.

Head-on propulsion through cinematic space is also prominently used to express the superhero's relationship to urban surroundings and discourses in scenes in which Superman flies through Metropolis. It is necessary to quickly survey representations of Superman's flight in previous incarnations before looking at the film's strategies, to fully comprehend the nature of the ways in which the film metamorphoses previous incarnations.

In early Golden Age *Superman* comic books, the superhero did not possess the full power of flight. However, his combination of super speed and the ability to "leap 1/8<sup>th</sup> of a mile: hurdle a twenty-story building" (*Action Comics* #1) blur the lines between speed, leaps and actual flight. For example, a panel from *Action Comics* #7 shows the hero running with no ground below him and the city skyline in the background, effectively running though the sky over the city [Figure 29].<sup>326</sup> Elsewhere, in a panel from

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<sup>325</sup> The shot literally reflects the panel by presenting Clark and the train moving from the right to the left of the frame, while the panel features a left to right trajectory.

<sup>326</sup> Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Superman Joins the Circus', *Action Comics* #7 (December 1938) (repr. in Yow, *Superman*, pp. 94-106).

*Action Comics* #8 Superman leaps out of a window with his arms outstretched in front of him, firing himself like an arrow [Figure 30].<sup>327</sup> This streamlined stance is the one that Superman would most commonly adopt when flying in future incarnations. In each of these panels, motion lines indicate Superman's rapid speed and trajectory through the air, and juxtapose him against the rigid urban skyline in the background. Iconic spatial indicators thus create a contrast between superhero and city that suggest Superman's ability to escape modernity's confining structures.



Figure 29 Superman runs through the air in *Action Comics* #7

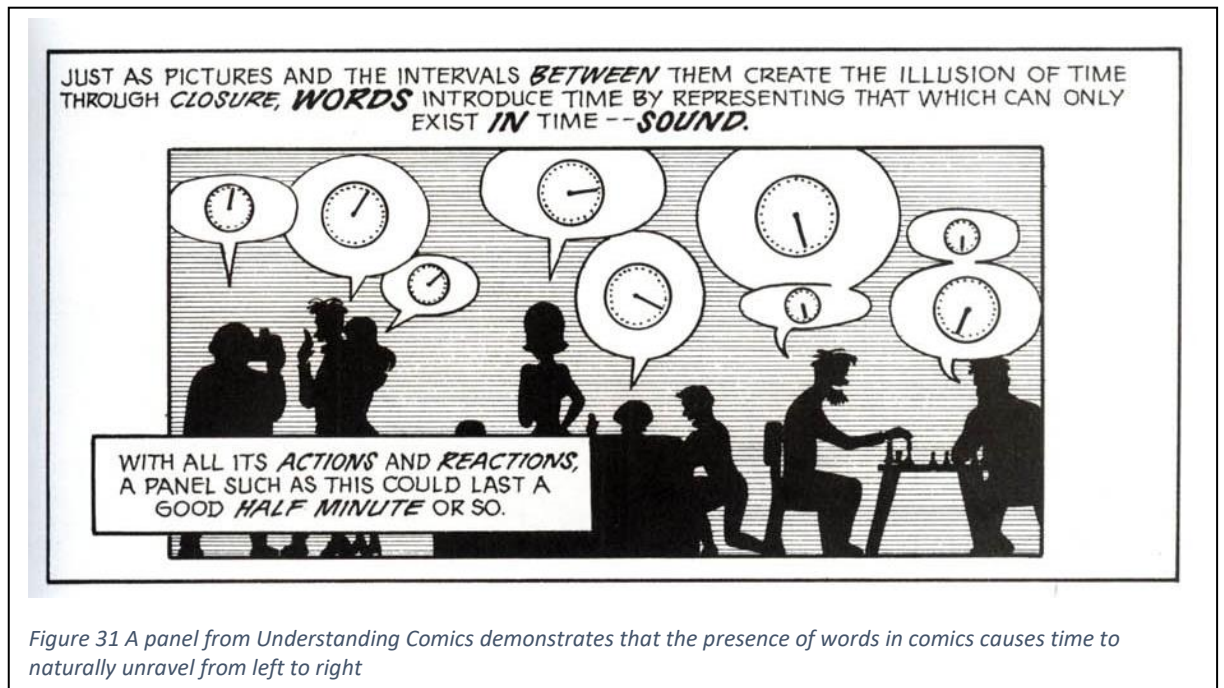


Figure 30 Superman leaps out of a window in *Action Comics* #8

Like other panels depicting movement discussed in this chapter, including the demonstrations of Superman's leaps and speed in *Action Comics* #1, and transformation from Clark to Superman in five figures in *Superman* #233, the above panels present movement occurring in a left-to-right trajectory. While a comic does not have to stage movement along this trajectory, the strategy's effectiveness is enhanced through its adherence to the conventional left-to-right trajectory along which written words are read in Western culture. The presence of written words alongside images in comics encourages readers to progress through the narrative from left to right. McCloud demonstrates that the presence of words in comics causes time to naturally unravel from left to right in a panel in which speech

<sup>327</sup> Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a), 'Superman in the Slums', *Action Comics* #8 (January 1939) (repr. in Yow, *Superman*, pp. 108-120).

balloons contain clock faces that the hand moves further around as the balloons pass from left to right [Figure 31].<sup>328</sup>



While movement in comics is not always staged along a left-to-right trajectory, it generally unfolds along the page's x-axis and y-axis; left or right, up or down. Movement occurs *across the space of the page*. It has to be noted that movement can be staged toward or away from the fourth wall.<sup>329</sup> A panel from *Action Comics #7* that depicts Superman propelling himself "into the night like a living projectile" provides an example [Figure 32]. In this panel, Superman's deviation from more common trajectories in comics complements other compositional features. Superman's feet breaking the panel border, and the diagonal angle of his body contrasting the horizontal and vertical lines that make up the city behind, and panel around, him, also suggest the character's ability to rupture restrictive structures. Despite these subversions, the space of the page is still used to naturalise movement. The panel is preceded

<sup>328</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 95.

<sup>329</sup> McCloud identifies a technique he calls 'subjective motion', in which a panel represents the point of view of a moving object. Movement is indicated by motion lines receding from a vanishing point somewhere in the middle of the panel to the panel border. McCloud explains that this technique started to be used by Japanese artists in the late-sixties, 'and starting in the mid-eighties, a few American artists began to adopt the effect in their own work, until by the early nineties it has become fairly common'. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 114.



by one in which Superman is poised in a window, facing right, and followed by one in the next strip that depicts his landing, motion lines tracing a diagonal trajectory from the panel in which he is airborne, while the angle is reversed to show him from behind. The trajectories in this sequence of panels trace Superman's movement from one panel and diegetic location to the next, while emphasising his ability to fluidly traverse urban space.

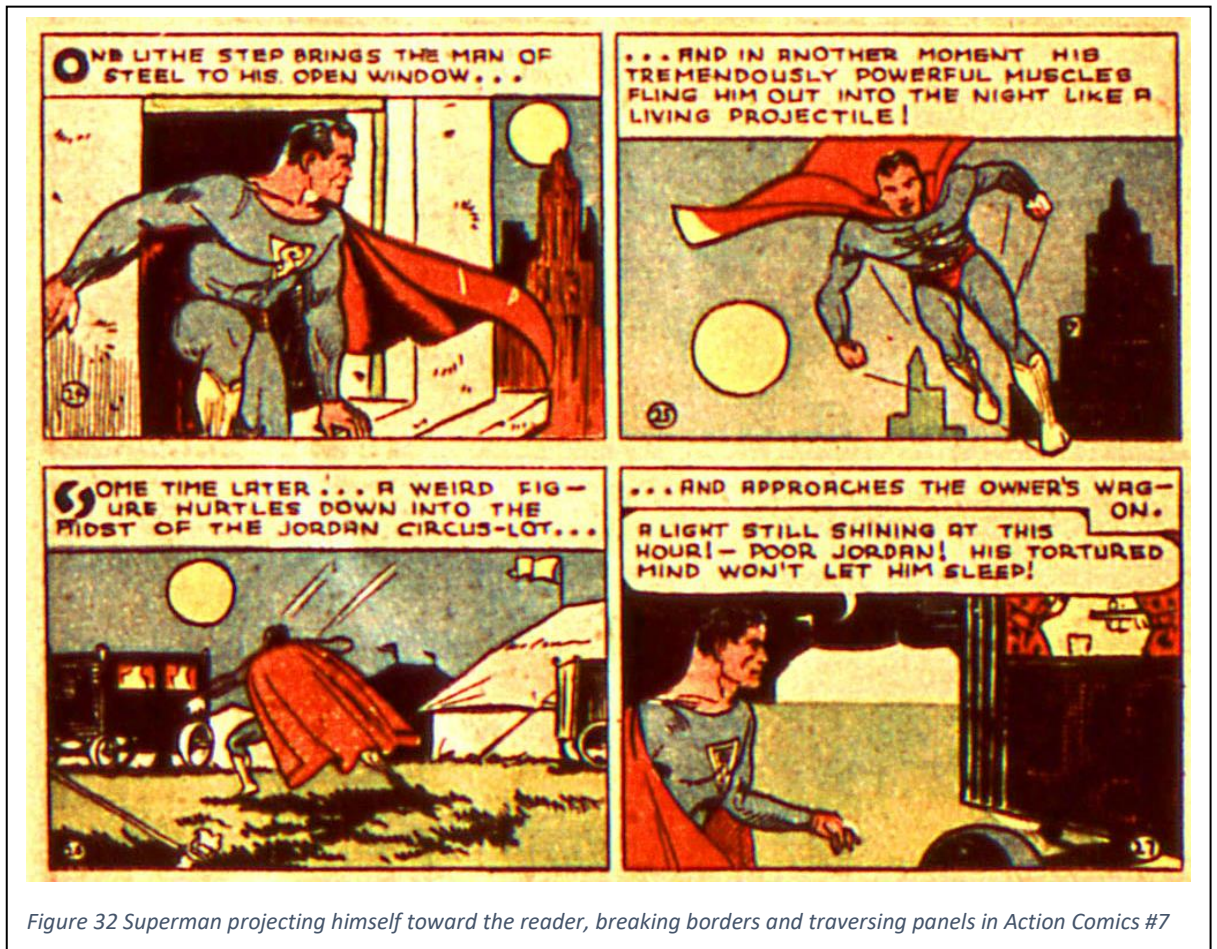


Figure 32 Superman projecting himself toward the reader, breaking borders and traversing panels in Action Comics #7

Prior to *Superman: The Movie*, images of Superman in flight in live-action adaptations mostly replicated the horizontal trajectories common to comic book incarnations. The film serials and television series both prominently feature side-on shots of their stars [Figure 33 and Figure 34], with either clouds or the city rushing by behind them. In shots from the television series that include scenery in the background, Superman is in sharp focus while the scenery is in soft focus. The background possesses no gradients of focus that would grant it depth, and the image is thus flattened out into two planes. Superman traces a horizontal path in the foreground against a flattened backdrop.



Figure 33 Side-on perspective of Superman in flight in *Atom Man vs. Superman*



Figure 34 Side-on perspective of Superman in flight in the television series

From season two onward the television series also features some shots of Superman flying toward or away from the camera.<sup>330</sup> One significant piece of footage that is deployed in multiple episodes shows Superman flying toward the camera, which tracks backward slowly, giving the sense that the city projected in the background is moving further away [Figure 35].<sup>331</sup> The close proximity in which the shot places Superman and city highlight the parallel positioning of Superman's body and the straight road below, which both stretch toward the back of the frame. Scenes presenting Superman's flight in *Superman: The Movie*



Figure 35 Superman flies toward the camera, with the cityscape in the background, in the television series

metamorphoses these techniques and deploys additional forms of movement to articulate the bond between Superhero and city.

<sup>330</sup> The new techniques used to create the flight sequences from season two onward are discussed by Grossman, *Superman*, p. 87.

<sup>331</sup> Examples of episodes in the second season that feature this shot include 'The Clown Who Cried' and 'The Whistling Bird'. Even after the introduction of this shot, and others that frame flight comparably, the primary way in which the series frames Superman's flight is still side-on. This is apparent in the fact that Superman's flight was still shown side-on in the opening of every episode, making this framing central to the television series' iconography.

Scott Bukatman's discussion of kaleidoscopic perception helps situate the stylistic strategies deployed in *Superman: The Movie's* flight sequences in broader cinematic and cultural frameworks. Bukatman discusses the kaleidoscopic effects sequence and kaleidoscopic perception. These are intrinsically related, but the kaleidoscopic effects sequence is a specific aesthetic strategy, while kaleidoscopic perception can be more broadly used to describe ways in which human perception adapts to modernity's fragmented and ephemeral phenomena. Bukatman identifies the kaleidoscopic effects sequence as a convention of science fiction films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977) and *Altered States* (Ken Russell, 1980). He explains that '[t]he archetypal kaleidoscopic effects sequence... features a first-person camera engaged in a relentless movement of forward penetration, distortions of the visual field, and a distended sense of time'.<sup>332</sup> This aptly describes the opening credit sequence for *Superman: The Movie*, and also a later sequence in which Clark's psyche takes a journey through Krypton's history and Jor-El's teachings on science, theology and morality. Throughout this second sequence, the viewer is propelled through stars and vivid cosmic phenomena as Jor-El's dialogue fades in and out, creating a sense of spatiotemporal distortion.

Twelve years of diegetic time have passed when Clark's journey of the psyche ends, and the viewer is given their first glimpse of Reeve as Superman. He is presented in very long shot [Figure 36] and proceeds to fly toward the stationary camera in one graceful, unbroken movement. It is not Superman's body that is the focus of this reveal, but his movement. As Superman flies toward the camera the trajectory of the preceding sequence is inverted. Rather than the audience being projected through space, Superman is coming to us. His arms stretch out in front of him, accentuating the length of his body and depth of the environment down which it stretches, an arrow pointing from the back to the front of this space. The composition and head-on trajectory highlight the depth of cinematic space and film's ability to present unbroken movement. While characters in comics typically move

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<sup>332</sup> Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 117.

across the space of the page, the temporal flow of film means that characters can progress through time and diegetic space, while still occupying the same space in the centre of the frame, in a single take. These properties of film enable the left-to-right trajectory commonly used in comics to be metamorphosed into a back-to-front one.



Figure 36 The first glimpse of Christopher Reeve in full Superman costume in *Superman: The Movie*

Presentations of Superman's flight in Metropolis combine these strategies with other kinds of movement to convey the kaleidoscopic qualities of the modern city. The technique used to realise Superman's flight was devised by Zoran Perisic. Tye describes how Perisic

put zoom lenses on both the camera and the projector so that the projected image, as seen by the camera, never changed size. Superman, who was in front of that image, appeared to come closer or move further away – and to be performing aerial manoeuvres when the camera/projector rig rotated – when in fact he was standing still.<sup>333</sup>

Motion is evident in complementary zooms of the camera and projected image and the camera's rotations, while Christopher Reeve swerves and banks. These alternating layers of movement multiply the types of motion evident in head-on shots of George Reeves, and recall the view down a kaleidoscope. The staging of Superman's flight thus encapsulates many elements of the 'combination of delirium, kinesis and immersion ... the headlong rush, the rapid montage, and the bodily address'

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<sup>333</sup> Tye, *Superman*, p. 197. Please be aware that when I discuss Superman rolling whilst airborne in my subsequent analysis I am referring to the effect caused by the camera rotating.

that Bukatman attributes to kaleidoscopic perception.<sup>334</sup> Bukatman aligns these qualities with the giddy experiences of urban life:

Kaleidoscopic perception was fundamental to the rhetorics that surrounded the modern metropolis ... The city was presented as a chaotic tumult of activity and sensory bombardment, sometimes to damn it, other times to celebrate it, but always to heighten its transformative power. Kaleidoscopic perception served to turn the fear of instability into the thrill of topsy-turveydom.<sup>335</sup>

The sensory overload of the city is at once disconcerting, transformative and thrilling. As discussed earlier, Superman, and the figure of the superhero more generally, can embody these urban fears and aspirations. The use of kaleidoscopic techniques in Superman's flight scenes thus provides a powerful means through which to augment and express the superhero's relation to modernity.

Superman's flight in *Superman: The Movie* goes beyond the metaphorical representation of urban experience through kaleidoscopic stylistics that Bukatman describes. When Superman flies away after saving Lois and revealing himself to Metropolis, actual urban phenomena – city lights and skyscrapers – are integrated into kaleidoscopic presentational strategies. The shot showcasing Superman's flight begins with him gliding into the frame from the bottom-right, head-on with his back parallel to the right side of the frame [Figure 37]. His body then rolls 90° so that his chest is parallel to the bottom of the frame, while he curls into roughly the frame's centre [Figure 38]. Superman's right-to-left entrance thus combines with his back-to-front trajectory

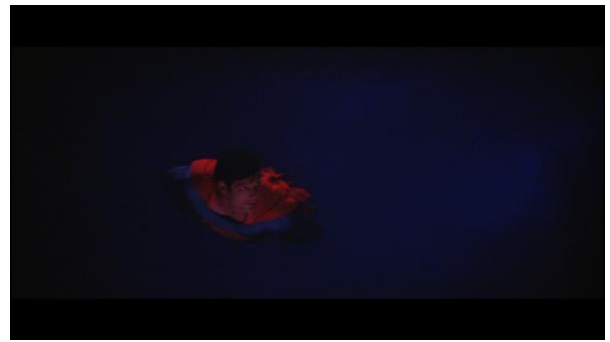


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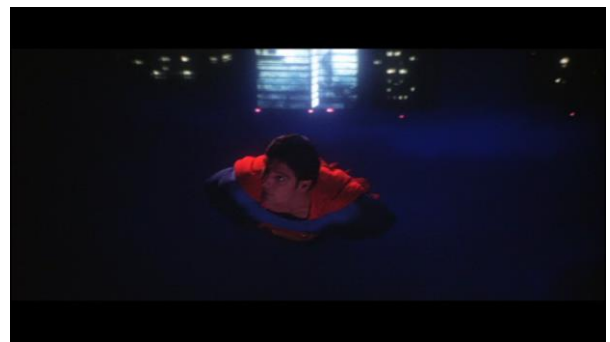
<sup>334</sup> Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, p. 3.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

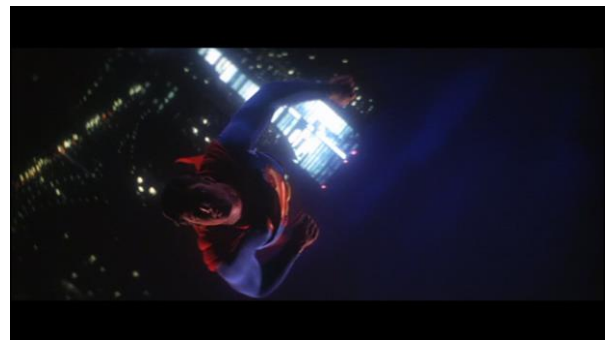
and body's rotation. The navy night sky behind him is then filled with the lights of Metropolis in the distance as Superman seemingly drifts upward [Figure 39]. The attention-grabbing nature of Superman's flight – his position of centrality and head-on trajectory, along with his iconic appearance and the sheer wonder of human flight being realised in live-action – obscures that fact that the city's skyline is upside down. Superman then rolls clockwise, and the city's inversion is outlined by the disorientation caused when, once he has turned about 270°, the skyline rotates counter-clockwise [Figure 40]. The rotations continue until both Superman and Metropolis settle upright [Figure 41]. The destabilising, alternating rotations of the city and Superman manifest the multitude of rotations in a kaleidoscope. Presenting flight in this way imbues Metropolis with the same unbounded freedom as Superman enjoys, encapsulating Bukatman's assertion that 'the superhero city is a place of weightlessness, a site that exists,



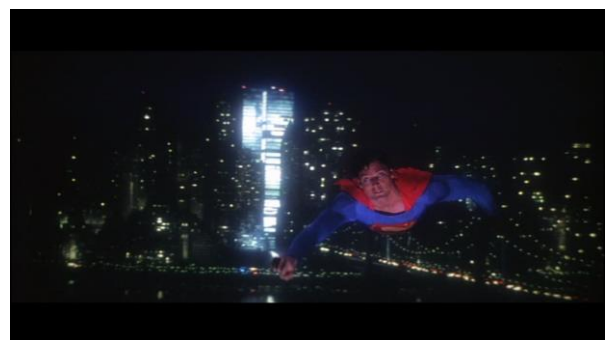
*Figure 38 Superman's flight levels in Superman: The Movie*



*Figure 39 City lights appear in the background as Superman seemingly drifts upward in Superman: The Movie*



*Figure 40 Superman rolls clockwise and the city rotates counter-clockwise in Superman: The Movie*



*Figure 41 Kaleidoscopic rotations conclude once Superman and Metropolis settle upright in Superman: The Movie*

at least in part, in playful defiance of the spirit of gravity'.<sup>336</sup>

*Superman: The Movie* grants a photographic representation of Metropolis (for which New York stands in) dynamism through kaleidoscopic rotations that draw superhero and city together in complementary, if alternate, kinesis. This technique uses a variety of movements and indicators of depth to metamorphose devices used in previous incarnations that expressed Superman's spatial freedom and subversion of urban space. While spatial cues in comics map Superman's trajectories, and guide the reader's gaze, across panels and pages, and through doing so convey his ability to freely navigate space, *Superman: The Movie* achieves this effect through a multitude of movements within a single shot.

Extravagant exhibition of movement and depth through deployment of head-on propulsion showcases the film's ability to construct, and Superman's power to move uninhibitedly through, a vividly realised universe. This motif continues through to the final shot.<sup>337</sup> Superman is shown curving gracefully around the Earth, and then toward the camera, smiling to the audience as he passes [Figure 42].<sup>338</sup> The motif has taken the audience to alien planets, articulated Superman's relation to urban space, and now conveys his acknowledgment of the world beyond the fourth wall. The motif is thus harnessed to re-envision a familiar fictional universe while projecting its hero outward into the audience's world, encouraging them to embrace this incarnation as their central reference point for *Superman*. The film's assertion of its superiority over previous incarnations is achieved through heightened spectacle that seeks to involve viewers in the diegesis while simultaneously showcasing the special effects themselves. Geoff King identifies this strategy as a key feature of blockbuster films, which 'feature

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>337</sup> The motif is also used in the end credits, which are presented through similar techniques to those used in the opening credits.

<sup>338</sup> This instance of direct address metamorphoses a trope deployed in many previous incarnations, in which stories end with Clark clearly implying to Lois that he is Superman, but only the audience registers the implication. For example, this trope features in Golden Age comic books, the Fleischer/Famous studios cartoons, the film serials and television series. The direct channel of address this trope opens between text and audience is underscored on the frequent occasions in the Fleischer/Famous Studios Cartoons when Clark proceeds to wink at the audience.

spectacular on-screen events that often include expensive displays of the latest in special effects technologies'.<sup>339</sup> In utilising the properties of film to construct spectacular sequences of head-on propulsion, *Superman: The Movie* does not just make a bid for centrality within the *Superman* matrix, but exhibits its credentials as a blockbuster at a time when the understanding of this category of film was changing.



Figure 42 Superman flies toward the audience and smiles in final shot of *Superman: The Movie*

### *The New Hollywood Adventures of Superman*

*Superman: The Movie* established both *Superman* and the superhero genre as viable material for blockbusters in the changing political economy of 1970s Hollywood. Significant shifts in Hollywood production, narrative and approach to genre have been identified in the late 1960s and 1970s, which has been critically deemed the emergence of 'New Hollywood'. Due to differing accounts of what constitutes New Hollywood, Noël King identifies three distinct moments in the transition from Old to New. The first is 'a brief window of opportunity that existed from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, when an adventurous new cinema emerged, linking the traditions of classic Hollywood genre filmmaking with the stylistic innovations of European art cinema'.<sup>340</sup> This moment is attributed to the

<sup>339</sup> King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, p. 50.

<sup>340</sup> Noël King, 'New Hollywood', in Pam Cook (ed), *The Cinema Book*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: BFI, 2007), p. 60. King's examples of films defining this moment are '*The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde* (both 1967), *Easy Rider*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *MASH* and *Midnight Cowboy* (all 1969)'.



financial failures of big studio productions leaving Hollywood keen to try new strategies. The second moment is ‘the arrival of the ‘movie brats’’, directors such as Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma and Francis Ford Coppola who had studied film.<sup>341</sup> The uncertainty of Hollywood studios that facilitated the first moment enabled these filmmakers to produce ‘self-consciously auteurist cinema’.<sup>342</sup> The third moment, the ‘one on which all critics agree’, saw a return to a more concrete model of production, with the focus being the production of blockbusters.<sup>343</sup> The release of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) initiated the third moment. Films such as *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), *Superman* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) developed the filmmaking model and demonstrated its commercial viability.

While films referred to as blockbusters, which were produced for massive budgets and emphasised on-screen spectacle, had been produced in Hollywood for decades prior to the 1970s, the model of blockbuster filmmaking constructed by *Jaws* established a significant new filmmaking paradigm.<sup>344</sup> Thomas Schatz undertakes a useful exploration of ways in which the New Hollywood blockbuster reconfigured Hollywood at the levels of economics, industry and aesthetics.<sup>345</sup> Schatz argues that *Jaws*, like significant blockbusters in the previous two decades, ‘redefined the nature, scope, and profit potential of the blockbuster movie’.<sup>346</sup> What makes the developments pioneered by *Jaws* even more significant than those of previous decades is that the filmmaking paradigm it instigated was fast adopted by all the major Hollywood studios and has since continued to provide Hollywood’s central mode of production. Key features of this model include saturation booking, in which a blockbuster opens simultaneously on a great number of screens, summer releases for a studio’s most expensive

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>344</sup> For a discussion of the history and development of the Hollywood blockbuster production, see Sheldon Hall, ‘Tall Revenue Features: The Genealogy of the Contemporary Blockbuster’, in Steve Neale (ed.), *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2006), pp. 11-26.

<sup>345</sup> Thomas Schatz, ‘The New Hollywood’, in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (ed.), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8-36.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., p. 10. The key films Schatz identifies from the preceding few decades are *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille (as Cecil B. de Mille), 1956) and *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965).

films, and gearing narratives toward a newly conceptualised youth market that lacked the subversive sensibilities of baby boomers.<sup>347</sup>

Schatz identifies in the New Hollywood blockbuster paradigm a redefinition of textual boundaries, in which a film is fragmented across other media tie-ins and merchandise, which together form complex intertextual networks.<sup>348</sup> As such, Schatz deems the films 'multi-purpose entertainment machines that breed music videos and soundtrack albums, TV series and videocassettes, video games and theme park rides, novelizations and comic books'.<sup>349</sup> *Superman: The Movie* has the unique status among early New Hollywood blockbusters of not so much breeding a network of texts and merchandise, but rather seeking to insert itself into the centre of an extensive, pre-existing network. The ordering of texts within this network in terms of centrality and marginality, as has been demonstrated throughout my analysis, reveals that the network does not simply take the scattered form that Schatz suggests. Rather, an array of textual and extra-textual factors are engaged in a perpetual struggle to order the network. The strategies through which *Superman: The Movie* makes its bid for centrality in the *Superman* matrix do, however, align with the widely acknowledged blockbuster mentality of asserting supremacy over more modest productions by showcasing expense, spectacle and scale.

Many of the intertextual strategies through which *Superman: The Movie's* position in the *Superman* matrix is negotiated function as allusions. Noël Carroll demonstrates that allusion to film history emerged as a central trait of New Hollywood filmmaking, being used by directors 'to make comments on the fictional worlds of their films'.<sup>350</sup> The allusions in *Superman: The Movie*, from the black and white imagery in the opening moments to Clark's attire, generally recall films and comics from the media's Golden Ages in America. While showing affection for and announcing superiority over its textual predecessors, these allusions also enrich the film's diegetic universe by entwining it with a

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid, p. 19. Hall explains that the saturation releases of modern blockbusters were anticipated by exploitation films in the 1950s being released simultaneously on a large amount of screens to maximise profit before bad word of mouth spread ('Tall Revenue Features', pp. 14-15).

<sup>348</sup> Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', pp. 32-34.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10.

<sup>350</sup> Noël Carroll, 'The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)', *October*, 20 (1982), p. 52.

complex and culturally-beloved history. Allusions in *Superman: The Movie* thus contribute to the filmmakers' efforts to reenvision a familiar fictional universe.

Other strategies through which *Superman: The Movie's* universe is built helped develop the New Hollywood blockbuster's pursuit of intertextual expansion. Henry Jenkins quotes an unnamed 'experienced screenwriter' who states that, in film, screenwriting used to be about crafting a story, then became about creating a character that could feature in multiple stories, thereby allowing sequels, and has now developed into the construction of worlds that 'can support multiple characters and multiple stories across different media'.<sup>351</sup> In this practice, films are designed so that their diegetic worlds are predisposed to be explored further, and expanded, in other texts and merchandise. Stuart Henderson identifies *Superman: The Movie* as a significant turning point in the history of sequel production, 'at which the blockbuster philosophy and increased conglomeration of the previous twenty years officially converged with the production-line approach of the B-Movie'.<sup>352</sup> *Superman: The Movie's* production strategy sought to expedite the creation of sequels. While *Jaws* offers a self-contained narrative but spawned sequels, and *Star Wars* was conceived as part of a series, *Superman: The Movie* was the first New Hollywood blockbuster to integrate a commitment to serialisation into its production, with scripts for two films written, and set to be filmed, at the same time.<sup>353</sup> This strategy was theoretically economic, as all the filming on specific sets or locations for both films could be done in one block. However, after on-set tensions mounted and the budget and shooting schedule ballooned, the filming of *Superman II* (Richard Lester and Richard Donner (uncredited) 1980) was

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<sup>351</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: University Press, 2006), p. 116.

<sup>352</sup> Stuart Henderson, *The Hollywood Sequel: History and Form, 1911-2010* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 56. Henderson's study offers a corrective to popular conceptions that the sequel is a phenomenon of New Hollywood by outlining how series, serials and sequels have been evident, and often prominent as modes of production, throughout Hollywood's history. However, he traces important shifts in these practices throughout Hollywood's history, such as those instigated by the New Hollywood blockbuster. The key role comics have historically played in influencing and facilitating seriality in cinema is evident in Henderson's analysis when he notes that comic strip adaptations in 1900-1904 featured 'some of the earliest examples of recurring characters (as opposed to character types) in cinema' (p. 10).

<sup>353</sup> *Superman: The Movie* producers Alexander and Ilya Salkind had previously shot *The Three Musketeers* (Richard Lester, 1973) and *The Four Musketeers* (Richard Lester, 1974) this way, although without informing the actors that two movies would be made from the material, and thereby attempting to only pay them for one. Tye, *Superman*, p. 204.

eventually abandoned until after the first film had been released.<sup>354</sup> In what can be seen as a reaction to these issues, future productions to employ a comparable model generally shoot sequels ‘back to back’ after the commercial success of the first film is ensured.<sup>355</sup> *Superman: The Movie’s* pre-planned serialisation is inscribed into its narrative. Zod, Ursa and Non, after being incarcerated in the opening act, do not feature at all in the rest of the film. These characters were introduced so that they could return in the sequel, in which they are the main villains.

New Hollywood also saw shifts in which genres were favoured for blockbuster budgets. The fact that superheroes had previously provided suitable material for weekly film serials primed them for New Hollywood blockbuster treatment. Sheldon Hall observes that

the most common genres for recent blockbusters have been fantasy, science fiction and occasionally horror, but most often action-adventure films the collective generic origins of which lie in the matinee serials, B-movies and exploitation movies which once seemed least amenable to blockbuster treatment.<sup>356</sup>

Hall attributes this tendency to New Hollywood blockbusters striving to appeal to young people, who were the most common audiences for serials. New Hollywood blockbusters thus favoured genres previously associated with low-budget, low-brow films, rather than the traditional genres – ‘historical

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<sup>354</sup> It is not the intention, or within the scope, of this chapter to detail the troublesome production of *Superman: The Movie*, which has been amply chronicled elsewhere. See Tye, *Superman*, pp. 189-205; Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, pp. 56-117; and Mankiewicz and Crane, *My Life as a Mankiewicz*, pp. 188-220.

<sup>355</sup> Examples include *Back the Future Part II* (Robert Zemeckis, 1989) and *Back to the Future Part III* (Robert Zemeckis, 1990), *The Matrix Reloaded* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski (as The Wachowski Brothers), 2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski (as The Wachowski Brothers), 2003), and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (Gore Verbinski, 2006) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* (Gore Verbinski, 2007). This strategy is also becoming increasingly popular when adapting a series of novels like *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001), *The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002) and *The Return of the King* (Peter Jackson, 2003), or when the final novel in a series is being split into two parts, such as *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* (David Yates, 2010) and *Part 2* (David Yates, 2011) and *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 1* (Bill Condon, 2011) and *Part 2* (Bill Condon, 2012). Note that in the case of *Lord of the Rings* all instalments, not just the sequels, were shot back to back, suggesting the studio’s confidence with cast, crew and appeal of source material. The commitment to serialisation is also evident in the regular release schedules of these films. While film serials had their instalments released on a weekly basis, and comics generally follow monthly schedules, films shot back to back are generally released on an annual basis, making them into a yearly event.

<sup>356</sup> Hall, ‘Tall Revenue Features’, p. 23.

epics, musicals, Westerns, war films and even comedy' – that had typically attracted big budgets in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>357</sup>

Accounts that emphasise comparisons between the genres utilised by serials and New Hollywood blockbusters risk overlooking the lively genre hybridity occurring in blockbusters, in which low-brow genres intermingle with those that are more respected. Schatz states that *Star Wars*' 'hell-bent narrative careens from one genre-coded episode to another – from Western to war film to vine-swinging adventure – and also effectively melds different styles and genres in individual spaces'.<sup>358</sup> Schatz sees this kind of genre hybridity as lacking the smart commentary on genre conventions that films in Noël King's first two moments of New Hollywood performed. Schatz argues that instead this strategy leads to a 'purposeful incoherence' that is economically desirable as the different genres deployed ensure appeal to a wide audience, while the nostalgia for film serials has particular appeal to 'cineliterate parents and senior siblings'.<sup>359</sup> The episodic qualities that Schatz identifies in blockbusters differ from the qualities of episodes in a film serial. The generic coding of a blockbuster can shift from episode to episode, while film serials would largely be generically consistent.

As discussed earlier, *Superman: The Movie* progresses through distinctly stylised sections. Each of these deploy different combinations of genre conventions. For instance, the clinical whites of Krypton recall science fiction while dialogue accentuates familial drama as Jor-El and Lara (Susannah York) send away their only son. This deployment of Hollywood conventions is a continuation of a trend I observed earlier, in which *Superman* texts in media other than comics are often shaped by genres and formats

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<sup>357</sup> Hall, 'Tall Revenue Features', p. 23. The big budget films to use these genres in the 50s and 60s were "prestige" pictures, or "roadshows", that 'were conceived primarily for exclusive, pre-release exhibition in metropolitan theatres in downtown situations' (p. 18). This distribution strategy is markedly different from the 'saturation' releases of New Hollywood blockbusters.

<sup>358</sup> Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', p. 23. Schatz also discusses genre hybridity in *Jaws*, stating '*Jaws* was essentially an action film and a thriller, of course, though it effectively melded genres and story types. It tapped into the monster movie tradition with a revenge-of-nature subtext (like *King Kong*, *The Birds*, et al.), and in the film's latter stages the shark begins to take on supernatural, even Satanic, qualities à la *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*. And given the fact that the initial victims are women and children, *Jaws* also had ties to the high-gore "slasher" film... The seagoing chase in the latter half is also a buddy film and a male initiation story' (p. 18).

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

that are popular in their chosen medium. I will now analyse two sequences that demonstrate some of the functions of *Superman: The Movie's* genre hybridity.

When Mankiewicz outlines three stylistically distinct sections of *Superman: The Movie* he overlooks a fourth space that is used throughout the final act: the San Andreas Fault. The desert expanses are similar to the openness of Smallville. However, while Smallville presents a warm, nostalgic space in which Clark can be moulded into the man he will become in a coming-of-age drama, the broad desert plains, dams and isolated villages at the fault line facilitate the kinds of destruction and suspense familiar from disaster movies. Traits of other genres are also deployed as the sequence develops.

Ken Feil summarises the formula of 1970s disaster movies as 'a powerful natural force isolates the characters, challenges their survival, and motivates a string of spectacular adventures and effects displays'.<sup>360</sup> The fault line sequence changes the space in which these events transpire from the confining structures like skyscrapers or boats in disaster movies to broad desert land. In expanding the terrain over which the disaster, in this case an earthquake, occurs, *Superman: The Movie* reconfigures disaster movie conventions to enable Superman's flight, speed and strength to be demonstrated as he rescues people who are separated by great distances.<sup>361</sup> The disaster movie's 'dual threats of technological and natural catastrophe' are evident in the fact that the earthquake is instigated by a missile, and triggers an array of technological hazards, such as electric cables whipping around at power stations and lengths of train track collapsing.<sup>362</sup> Superman's status as champion of industrialisation is enforced when he shuts off the power station's electricity, and replaces the

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<sup>360</sup> Ken Feil, *Dying for a Laugh: Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), p. xv.

<sup>361</sup> Feil notes continuities but also distinctions between the disaster movies of the early 1970s and the blockbusters released later that decade. He does not consider films such as *Superman: The Movie* disaster movies, but acknowledges that they include the kinds of spectacle featured in disaster movies and take this spectacle to new extremes, while fusing disaster movie conventions with those of other genres. Feil explains: '*Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *Superman* (1978), surpass the disaster films' sensational thrills and deliberately inject self-parody. These new, "high concept" movies make overt and playful references to various kinds of pop culture, including disaster movies' (*Dying for a Laugh*, p. xx). Continuities and distinctions between disaster movies and blockbusters are elaborated on pp. 14-18, when Feil discusses relations between *Jaws* and disaster movies, and how *Jaws* 'devoured' the disaster genre.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

collapsed train track with his own outstretched body. The film therefore uses disaster movie conventions to reflect key tropes from the *Superman* matrix.

These scenes of spectacle promote Superman as a figure of action, whose fluid movements as he flies from the power station to the dam just in time to catch Jimmy recall the kinesis of the Fleischer Studios cartoons' Superman. However, the immense anguish that Lois' death puts the film's Superman through distinguishes him from the purely action-orientated Fleischer Superman. As Superman arrives at the scene of Lois' death the onslaught of rapidly edited shots and cacophonous sounds ceases, and the music slows to a melancholic tune. The transition to melodramatic romantic tragedy is completed as Superman lifts Lois' body while fighting back tears. Abrupt alterations in pacing, kinesis and sound signify a generic shift, from disaster movie to melodrama, within the same space. This shift also reveals a different side of Superman's character, transitioning from the unstoppable man of steel to the lonely figure who can never truly possess the woman he loves. Generic coding shifts again as Superman fires upward, out into space and proceeds to circle the earth so fast that it rotates backward, thereby reversing the flow of time. Superman's melodramatic distress therefore propels him into a distinctly science fiction time-travel scenario. This science fiction coding again forms intersections with the *Superman* matrix, particularly the intergalactic adventures of Silver Age comics.<sup>363</sup>

Geoff King argues that cinematic spectacle can take different forms, which can be deployed alongside one another in blockbusters to appeal to different audiences.<sup>364</sup> It is evident that the three kinds of spectacle that feed into one another in the sequence discussed above – the earthquake, Superman's emotional anguish and his subsequent reversal of time – appeal to fans of disaster films and science fiction, which are traditionally perceived as masculine genres, and romantic melodrama, conventionally considered to be feminine. Despite appealing to fragmented audiences, the segues between genres within a single sequence do not fragment Superman, but rather articulate different

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<sup>363</sup> In fact, in Silver Age comics Superman developed the ability to travel through time.

<sup>364</sup> King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 197-201.

aspects of his character, each of which is rooted in his spectrum of possible roles. The effect of this combination of different genre conventions that appeal to different audiences is therefore far from the incoherence that Schatz suggests. Various genres' conventions metamorphose familiar traits of Superman to present a superhero who is completed by his multiple facets.

Romance is even more pronounced in the sequence in which Superman takes Lois flying over Metropolis, which deploys conventions of another genre that traditionally attracts female spectatorship: the musical. This sequence occurs after Lois interviews Superman on her rooftop in a scene filled with romantic flirtation. The rooftop is many storeys above the city streets, the hustle and bustle of which is not even audible, and laden in green plants. This space offers a respite from urban modernity, and acts comparably to Northrop Frye's conceptualisation of 'the green world', a forest space with magical properties that allows characters in Shakespeare's comedies to transcend social constrictions, and is analogous to 'the dream world that we create out of our own desires'.<sup>365</sup> In this environment gender inequalities begin to resolve, with Lois taking charge and directing her questions to a somewhat coy Superman, and romance blooms between the two characters. These features are accentuated as Lois and Superman rise further above the strictures of the city through flight.

Although musicals and the superhero genre may at a glance seem incompatible, Bukatman argues that there are strong relations between urban musicals and superhero comics, stating that '[t]he city is reconfigured as a playground in the two genres that permit the most strikingly unfettered access to urban space, genres that license the suspension of the physical laws that govern time and space'.<sup>366</sup> Characters in both genres enjoy liberated movement around urban space. As Superman takes Lois

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<sup>365</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 183.

<sup>366</sup> Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, p. 7. Although, as previously discussed, the television adaptation of *It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman!* was a critical failure, there have been other musical/superhero hybrids. Notably, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (internet distribution, 2008), which premiered initially as a web series comprising three episodes, infuses a narrative about wannabe supervillain, Billy/Dr. Horrible's (Neil Patrick Harris) desires to be accepted into the Evil League of Evil and simultaneously win the affections of Penny (Felicia Day) with musical numbers. This genre hybrid plays on parallels between the common convention of superhero narratives whereby a character's role as superhero acts as an obstacle to romantic relationships, and narratives concerning romantic longing often featured in musicals.



flying the structures of urban space are transcended completely, the city skyline left behind under a floor of clouds.

Transcending the physical and manmade laws of the city, first by inhabiting the green world of Lois' rooftop and then through flight, enacts a move toward the utopianism that Richard Dyer locates in musicals.<sup>367</sup> Dyer argues that entertainment generally does not present models of utopian worlds; '[r]ather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies'.<sup>368</sup> He pays particular attention to ways that these feelings are conveyed by non-representational signs, such as 'colour, texture, movement, rhythm, melody, camerawork'.<sup>369</sup> When Superman and Lois break the cloud surface, the moonlight reflecting off the white clouds acts as a non-representational sign that grants the scene a romantic utopianism [Figure 43]. As they glide along, a shot presents Superman's profile in the foreground to frame right, and Lois in the background to the left as she loosens her grip



Figure 43 Superman and Lois break the cloud surface in *Superman: The Movie*



Figure 44 Superman in the foreground during *Superman: The Movie's* romantic flight sequence



Figure 45 Lois in the foreground during *Superman: The Movie's* romantic flight sequence

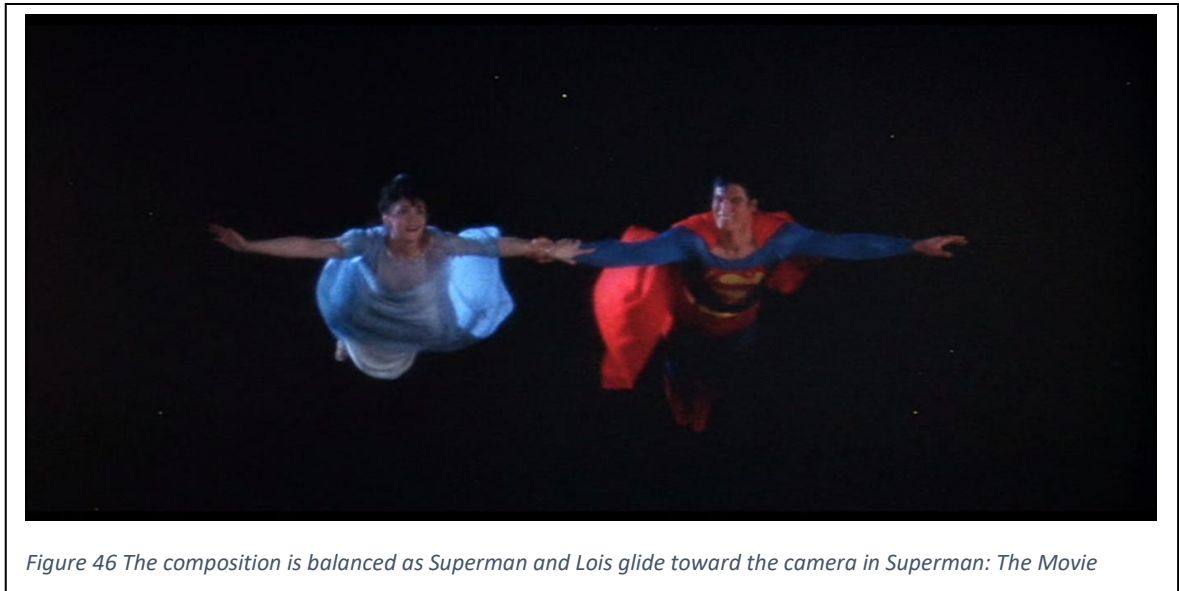
on his arm, gaining confidence [Figure 44]. This is preceded by a reverse shot with Lois in the

<sup>367</sup> Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 19-35. This influential chapter is titled 'Entertainment and Utopia'.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

foreground, as Superman smiles reassuringly [Figure 45]. The film switches between these angles until Lois' arms are fully outstretched, and the couple are shown head-on in long shot, gliding toward the camera [Figure 46]. Rhythmic editing that grants both characters equal screen time therefore builds to a shot in which Superman and Lois inhabit equal sides of the frame.



Evocations of equality and the characters' affection for each other develop as the sequence progresses. After Lois loses her grip and falls, and Superman catches her, the two embrace while the camera circles their aerial slow-dance. Lois' interior monologue plays in voiceover, reciting a romantic poem/song titled 'Can You Read My Mind?'<sup>370</sup> While in comics a reader would literally read Lois's thought balloons, in this musical number the ethereal inflection of her voice, along with Kidder's performance of enchantment and the sequence's cinematic construction, express the loving musings of her mind. The dance continues as Lois and Superman stretch out and glide toward the camera once again, although this time on opposite sides of the frame than in the earlier shot: Lois on the right, Superman on the left. The equal status of the two is such that they can freely swap positions. Lois then rises above Superman, seemingly gaining his ability to fly, before he balances the choreography by rising above

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<sup>370</sup> Although Lois recites the poem/song in spoken word, with John Williams' score in the background, it was later released as a single sung by Maureen McGovern.

her. In this utopian escape, even the roles that divide the characters dissolve as Lois effectively gains Superman's powers.

The presentation of this sequence evokes utopianism in a general sense, while also expressing far more specific meanings that refine the film's characterisation of Lois and Superman. The broad sense of freedom-through-flight aligns with Bukatman's argument that utopianism is embodied by a superhero's unrestricted movements, and as such 'utopia is less a place, a fixed site, than a trajectory. Actually, it's a field of possible, and multiple, trajectories'.<sup>371</sup> However, utopia is not only presented as movement and flight in this sequence; the particular ways these phenomena are presented also evoke utopia, as conceptualised by Dyer, as a feeling. Movement is just one element of cinematic construction that combines with rhythmic editing, shot composition, delivery of dialogue, etc., to express the feelings of utopianism. The qualities of these presentational strategies refine the sense of utopianism even further so that it is not just evoked as general feelings, but also expresses, and is expressed by, Superman and Lois' feelings. The deployment of musical conventions in this sequence augments sensations that the musical and superhero genre share, while metamorphosing a key feature of the *Superman* matrix: the relationship between Lois and Superman.

The specific kind of utopianism conveyed by the scene is also motivated by the film's positioning of Superman on the Clark/Superman spectrum. Dyer argues that utopianism in musicals only provides solutions to specific needs, and 'effectively denies the legitimacy of other needs and inadequacies, and especially of class, patriarchal and sexual struggles'.<sup>372</sup> The aerial dance in *Superman: The Movie* differs in that it dismantles gender inequality through the equal presentation of Lois and Superman in rhythmic edits and balanced compositions. This equality is therefore rooted not in musicals, but in the film's presentation of Superman as gentle, caring and romantic, which is enhanced through the deployment of generic codes from musicals.

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<sup>371</sup> Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, p. 125.

<sup>372</sup> Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, p. 27.

Throughout *Superman: The Movie*, utopianism-through-movement is evoked using the head-on propulsion motif, while interactions between Lois and Clark/Superman contribute to a narrative of romance. As such, although the dance routine is signified, through rising above the cloud surface, as occurring in a discrete space, with its own unique generic coding, the sequence is in fact a continuation of motifs and themes that permeate the film. Conventions of the musical amplify and metamorphose traits of the *Superman* matrix and superhero genre. The New Hollywood blockbuster approach to genre hybridity can therefore harness points of overlap between genres to create meaning and foster narrative cohesion. In the case of *Superman: The Movie*, the deployment of conventions of Hollywood genres that share concerns with the superhero genre facilitate *Superman's* transition into cinema.

### Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the approach established in my review of literature facilitates appreciation of the qualities and functions of the first superhero blockbuster's aesthetic strategies. Close analysis of *Superman: The Movie* has allowed me to explore how the film adapts, and makes a bid for centrality in, the *Superman* matrix, while establishing *Superman* and the superhero genre in 1970s Hollywood cinema.

The ways that *Superman* texts prior to *Superman: The Movie* interact with one another reveal the dynamism and breadth of a superhero's intertextual network. Tropes can be visual, worded or aural, and accumulate and transform as they are exchanged between incarnations that utilise different formal configurations. This aesthetic dialogue between incarnations is a key way that the characterisation of Clark/Superman shifts. Other significant factors that reposition these identities in relation to one another include genres and formats favoured by particular media, and sociopolitical contexts. The spectrum of possible roles for the Clark and Superman identities illuminates the variety within the *Superman* matrix. Interactions between *Superman* texts are an ongoing process in which identifying traits can transform as texts jostle for centrality in the *Superman* matrix. Texts that are decentred and pushed to marginal positions are not completely dismissed from the matrix. Elements of marginal incarnations can still be traced into central incarnations when you follow the intertextual

threads running through the matrix, while marginal incarnations can be drawn back toward the centre if a popular incarnation establishes more direct links with them. Analysing aesthetic interactions between texts thus enables the shape of the textual matrix, which provides the 'source' that a new incarnation adapts, to be mapped.

*Superman: The Movie* reconfigures a range of elements from across the *Superman* matrix. The film's style and form, along with connections it builds with cinematic culture, metamorphose these traits to the effect that this new incarnation of Superman is more than a collection of bits from previous versions. Reeve's Clark/Superman harkens back to past incarnations, exhibiting intertextual roots that interweave with numerous points on the matrix and thread all the way back to *Action Comics* #1. These roots also spread out more widely, for example Reeve's performance channelling Cary Grant. This configuration of intertextual relations places the Clark and Superman identities at points on the spectrum that are at once familiar and fresh, situating a wholesome Clark and mild mannered man of steel in close proximity.

The key motifs and strategies that have emerged from my analysis of *Superman: The Movie* metamorphose elements from the *Superman* matrix, while also performing other significant functions. Bright colours recall comics, while the specific colours of Superman's iconography create continuities between the film's discrete spaces and the different actors who play Kal-El/Clark/Superman. Meanwhile, remediations of comics' spatial properties outline formal distinctions between comics and film. Head-on propulsion is another motif prominent throughout the film that is used demonstrate film's formal advantages over comics, placing particular emphasis on the ability to stage movement through the depth of cinematic space. Tracing distance from the back to the front of the frame by having either the camera projected forward through space, or characters racing toward the camera, emphasises film's dimensional properties. Realising Superman's flight through these means also rearticulates the superhero's relations to urban modernity, which has been a core concern of the *Superman* matrix throughout its history. During Superman's kaleidoscopic excursions through

Metropolis, the city gains a dynamism comparable to Superman that had not previously been expressed in live-action incarnations. Formal reflections thus, true to Elliott's looking glass model, engender metamorphosis in meaning and content.

Many of the identified motifs and strategies exhibit an interesting tension, expressing affection and nostalgia for *Superman's* previous incarnations, while simultaneously asserting superiority over them. Extravagantly foregrounding the spatiotemporal properties of cinema, showcasing advanced special effects and deploying Hollywood stars are some of the key ways in which *Superman: The Movie* presents itself as the superior incarnation. Through doing so, the film makes a bid for centrality in the *Superman* matrix. It is significant that, while the analytical frameworks I have adopted reject binary and hierarchical logics, texts themselves continue to assert hierarchies based on a medium's formal and representational capacities.

*Superman: The Movie's* assertion of supremacy over previous incarnations parallels blockbuster cinema's endeavours to assert supremacy over more modest films. These strategies dovetail in *Superman: The Movie*, both being pursued through strategies that define the New Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking paradigm. The film's emphasis on the construction of a rich universe foregrounds the grand scale on which it is re-envisioning *Superman*, while the specifics of its production and narrative construction primed the universe for the kind of intertextual expansion sought by New Hollywood blockbusters. Furthermore, the film harnesses the New Hollywood blockbuster approach to genre hybridity to metamorphose the *Superman* universe via different kinds of cinematic spectacle. From the destruction of disaster movies to the fluid choreography of musicals, forms of spectacle developed by other cinematic genres recreate familiar characters and the universe they inhabit in distinctly cinematic and pointedly grandiose ways. The particular ways that conventions of other genres amplify and transform different elements from the *Superman* matrix also challenge claims that the approach to genre hybridity in New Hollywood blockbusters engenders narrative incoherence. These various genre conventions provide pre-established devices with which to bring

different, but interconnected and complementary, elements of the same textual matrix together in film.

*Superman: The Movie* thus harnesses cinematic form and genres to adapt a matrix of *Superman* texts, and situate itself in the centre of this matrix. Through doing so, the film establishes specific motifs and strategies that future additions to both the *Superman* matrix and superhero cinema could themselves metamorphose. As I jump forward two decades to the superhero blockbuster's boom in the 2000s, I will broaden my concerns to consider not just how these films engage with their own franchises' matrices, but also whether they develop the strategies deployed in *Superman: The Movie*.

## Chapter Two – Digital Power and Moral Responsibility: The Marvel Superhero in the Twenty-First Century

Just over twenty years after *Action Comics* #1 began the superhero genre, Marvel Comics reworked superhero conventions and helped renew interest in the genre. Similarly, just over twenty years after *Superman: The Movie* propelled the first superhero into blockbuster cinema, the first blockbuster adaptations of Marvel superheroes were released, instigating the twenty-first century superhero blockbuster boom.<sup>373</sup> The success of director Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man*, which was the top-grossing domestic release of 2002, and its sequels (2004 and 2007), was central to this wave of films.<sup>374</sup> Two contexts that are frequently deemed instrumental in facilitating the production and popularity of twenty-first century superhero blockbusters are the increasing prominence of digital filmmaking technologies, and the attacks on the World Trade Centre on 9 September 2001.<sup>375</sup> In this chapter, by applying my approach to an analysis of Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy, I explore how the films' aesthetics of adaptation harness digital filmmaking technologies and engage with the twenty-first century sociopolitical climate. Since each film in the trilogy is directed by Sam Raimi, for the sake of clarity and to ensure against confusion with subsequent *Spider-Man* films set in other continuities, I will refer to it as Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> The first blockbuster to be adapted from Marvel superheroes was 2000's *X-Men*.

<sup>374</sup> *Spider-Man* grossed \$403,706,375 domestically and \$821,708,551 worldwide. *Spider-Man 2* grossed \$373,585,825 domestically and \$783,766,341 worldwide, while *Spider-Man 3* grossed \$336,530,303 domestically and \$890,871,626 worldwide. The immense popularity of *Spider-Man* contributes to its representational status among films at the beginning of the twenty-first century superhero blockbuster boom. All figures from *Box Office Mojo*, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/>>, accessed on 04 July 2014.

<sup>375</sup> For example, Andreas Rauscher argues that digital effects are one of the key factors that facilitated the new-wave of superhero adaptations in the 2000s, Hassler-Forest argues that superhero films are, more than any other Hollywood genre, attuned to and reflective of discourses of neoliberal capitalism in the post-9/11 landscape, and Burke explores the extent to which these two frequently identified contexts have influenced the popularity of the twenty-first century comic book movie. Andreas Rauscher, 'The Marvel Universe on Screen: A New Wave of Superhero Movies?', Berninger, Ecke and Haberkorn (ed.), *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures*, pp. 21-32; Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes*; Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, pp. 24-54

<sup>376</sup> Individually I will refer to the films as Raimi's *Spider-Man*, Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* and Raimi's *Spider-Man 3*. The *Spider-Man* films that were released subsequently are *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (Marc Webb, 2014). *Spider-Man* also features in *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2016) and the forthcoming *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017 (details correct at time of writing)).



I begin by outlining the key ways that Marvel reworked superhero genre conventions in the 1960s. I demonstrate this fresh approach to the superhero through analysis of Spider-Man's comic book debut, and explore the pliability of Spider-Man's traits by surveying some subsequent comic book and screen incarnations. Throughout this discussion, I highlight pertinent comparisons and distinctions between *Superman* and *Spider-Man*.

I proceed to explore ways in which Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy use digital filmmaking technologies to metamorphose *Spider-Man's* traits. To consider the opportunities that digital filmmaking technologies offer live-action adaptations of superhero comics, I expand my review of literature's discussion of ontological and conceptual relations between drawn and photographic images by adding CGI to this exploration. Since discourses of cinematic realism often provide key criteria through which CGI is evaluated, I outline how these issues impact the construction of digital images. While interrogating discourses of indexicality that are pervasive in discussions of cinematic realism, I also move away from these criteria by looking at conceptualisations of cinematic realism based on movement. Besides questions of realism, I explore ways in which CGI contributes to the films' meanings. The appearance, movement and narrative function of CGI in Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy are then considered together in an analysis of the superhero's and his supervillains' bodies.

I move from my analysis of bodies to an examination of space. It is through this discussion of space that I explore ways in which the films' aesthetic construction communicates their sociopolitical perspectives. Rather than framing this discussion in terms of how the films directly engage with the context of 9/11, I consider the films' broader engagement with sociopolitical ideas, while observing more specific comments on contemporary contexts that can be read into this wider discourse. The films' use of CGI continues to be a key concern as I discuss the presentation of New York's external spaces. Looking at how the relationship between these spaces, *Spider-Man* and New York's citizenry is articulated in action set-pieces, alongside the cultural makeup of this citizenry, reveals how the films conceptualise New York and its community. This exploration of social identity develops as I proceed to

analyse nostalgic stylisation of key internal spaces, paying particular attention to what roles these spaces present to Peter Parker/Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire). I restrict this analysis to spaces presented in the first film, to enable assessment of whether meanings are created through the ways these spaces are situated in close narrative relation to one another.

Finally, I consider ways in which the sequels reposition Peter/Spider-Man on his spectrum to develop the exploration of roles that he can adopt. This analysis is undertaken concurrently with an examination of the trilogy's presentation of Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst), which enables interrogation of the ways in which the films frame femininity. This last section picks up and foregrounds a concern that recurs throughout the chapter with how serialisation can complement the adaptive practices of superhero blockbusters.

### A New Breed of Superhero?

Although Spider-Man was not the first of Marvel's Silver Age superheroes, he is typically seen as their apotheosis, Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner deeming him 'the unquestioned flagship character of Marvel Comics'.<sup>377</sup> When discussing the 1960s as the 'Marvel Age' of comics, in regard to *Spider-Man* comics produced in the period Wright suggests that 'it is difficult to overstate the impact of these early Spider-Man comic books on the subsequent development of the industry. The young, flawed and brooding antihero became the most widely imitated archetype in the superhero genre since the appearance of Superman'.<sup>378</sup> The fresh approach to superheroes undertaken in Silver Age Marvel comics and exemplified by *Spider-Man* has thus been compared in significance to *Superman's* debut.

Wright identifies three key contexts that shaped Marvel's comics, and facilitated their success, in the 1960s: the comics code, the Vietnam War and the shifting role of youth culture in America.<sup>379</sup> The

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<sup>377</sup> Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner, 'Introduction' in Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (ed.) *Web-Spinning Heroics: Critical Essays on the History and Meaning of Spider-Man* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), p. 4.

<sup>378</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, p. 212.

<sup>379</sup> These contexts are discussed in the chapter titled 'Great Power and Great Responsibility: Superheroes in a Superpower, 1956-1967'. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, pp. 180-225.

comics code, a set of rules and regulations self-imposed by comic book publishers following the outrage against the medium in the 1950s, caused many publishers of crime and horror comics to cease production, leaving a gap in the market for comics that could offer appealing content within the code's restrictions.<sup>380</sup> Meanwhile, America's actions in Vietnam were dividing the nation's opinion, and a significant group that were speaking out against the government's decisions were America's youth, who were burgeoning as an 'economic, social and political force'.<sup>381</sup>

Wright explains that in the late 1950s/early 1960s, in an effort to appease parents, DC's superheroes conformed to establishment values.<sup>382</sup> Wright and Sean Howe both argue that the first signs of an alternative perspective from Marvel surfaced in the publisher's sci-fi stories drawn by Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko. Kirby's primarily dealt with monsters created through science, Ditko's concerned individuals alienated by the modern world, both speaking to the anxieties of the atomic age in contrast to DC's championing of science.<sup>383</sup> These themes carried into Marvel's superhero titles, with *The Fantastic Four* #1 being the first to reconfigure the genre by making the heroes' personal problems a key narrative feature.<sup>384</sup> *The Fantastic Four* interlocks fears of science with its heroes' internal anxieties. The team's bodies are transformed by cosmic rays while on a mission to space, granting them superpowers but also, particularly for Ben Grimm/The Thing, whose skin irreversibly mutates to rock, serving to segregate them from humanity. This established the Marvel superhero archetype. As

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., pp. 181-182.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., p. 200. Wright attributes America's youths' newfound power to their value as consumers, emerging lines of thought that 'regarded teenage rebellion as a natural and functional process in adolescent development' and President Kennedy's championing of youth.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-187. Despite this conservative sociopolitical alignment, DC's contribution to renewed interest in superhero comics in the Silver Age should not be overlooked. As noted in my review of literature, the revival of the Flash in *Showcase* #4 is widely considered to have instigated the Silver Age. For a discussion of the significance of the Flash revival see Grant Morrison, *Supergods*, pp. 82-87.

<sup>383</sup> Wright, p. 203; Sean Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013), p. 34.

<sup>384</sup> Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (a), 'The Fantastic Four', *The Fantastic Four* #1 (November 1961) (repr. in Cory Sedlmeier (ed.), *Marvel Masterworks: The Fantastic Four Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2009), pp. 1-25). The genesis of the creation of the Fantastic Four is generally attributed to Marvel's publisher, Martin Goodman, asking chief writer Stan Lee to imitate DC's Justice League (Wright, p. 203-204; Howe, p.1). Rather than merely copying DC, Lee remoulded the superhero team. In another account, artist Jack Kirby contends that he was primarily responsible for the team's creation (Howe, p.2). Like much of Marvel's inner workings in the 1960s, it is now hard to construct a definitive picture of who created what, despite the numerous lawsuits over ownership of characters that have occurred since. For more on the business workings of Marvel and legal disputes see Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*

described by Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, this archetype 'displayed self-doubt and anxiety, awareness of their own 'dark side' or a profound sense of irony regarding their own powers. A regular trope was the perception of heroic powers not as gifts, but as a curse or unbearable responsibility'.<sup>385</sup>

The adolescent anxieties suffered by the teenage Peter Parker/Spider-Man were particularly relatable to young readers.<sup>386</sup> In fact, young readers were explicitly encouraged to project themselves onto the hero, with the caption that ends *The Amazing Spider-Man* #9 stating "next issue: more fascinating details about the life and adventures of the world's most amazing teen-ager -- Spider-Man -- the superhero who could be -- you!"<sup>387</sup> Spider-Man is pitted against the adult establishment through being repeatedly persecuted by the media and police. Peter Lee argues that early *Spider-Man* comics, rather than simply presenting adults as wrong, explore 'the intergenerational tension in the 1960s between the emerging counterculture and the "establishment"'.<sup>388</sup> Following Lee, 1960s *Spider-Man* stories express adolescent unease with the sociopolitical climate, while not wholeheartedly criticising it, enabling them to operate within the regulations of the comics code. C.M. Stephens attributes Spider-Man's enduring appeal to this balance of countercultural sentiments with traditional values: 'teenagers can identify with the angst of Peter Parker and revel in "Spidey's" victories, whilst traditional moral and social values are reinforced through the details of Spider-Man's emotional and spiritual development'.<sup>389</sup> Stephens identifies the key traditional values that early *Spider-Man* comics promote as family values and heterosexual, monogamous ideals.

The equivocal nature of early *Spider-Man* comics recalls how Superman can embody contradictory values. However, the emphasis on personal anxieties, specifically those of teenagers, refocused the

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<sup>385</sup> Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, p. 7.

<sup>386</sup> Prior to Spider-Man, teenagers had typically only been sidekicks in superhero narratives.

<sup>387</sup> Stan Lee (w), Steve Ditko (a), 'The Man Called Electro!', *The Amazing Spider-Man* #9 (February 1964) (repr. in Bob Budiansky (ed.) *Marvel Masterworks Volume 1: The Amazing Spider-Man Nos 1-10 and Amazing Fantasy No. 15* (Exeter: Pedigree Books, 1997), pp. 201-223).

<sup>388</sup> Peter Lee, 'Have Great Power, Greatly Irresponsible: Intergenerational Conflict in 1960's Amazing Spider-Man', in Peaslee Weiner (ed.), *Web Spinning Heroics*, p. 29.

<sup>389</sup> C.M. Stephens, 'Spider-Man: An Enduring Legend' in Dudley Jones and Tony Watkins (ed.), *A Necessary Fantasy?: The Heroic Figure in Children's Popular Culture* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), p. 258.

approach to superheroes to explore not just their powers, but also their weaknesses. Analysis of Spider-Man's comic book debut can further elucidate ways that the character remoulded superhero conventions.

Points of intersection with and departure from Superman are emphasised from the very first glimpse of Spider-Man on the cover of the 1962 comic book that featured his first story, *Amazing Fantasy* #15 [Figure 47].<sup>390</sup> The image shows Spider-Man swinging through the air, chest thrust out, a man who we presume to be a criminal squirming under one arm. Like the image of Superman smashing the car on *Action Comics* #1, Spider-Man's abilities are foregrounded. Furthermore, the tilted angle at which buildings in the background are presented conveys the elastic freedom with which Spider-Man navigates the city, situating him, like Superman, as both conqueror and celebratory embodiment of modernity. Stephens outlines the heroism exuded by this image: '[o]ur initial impression is of a mysterious but clearly confident and capable crime fighter, secure in his superior strength and skill, utterly in command of the situation'.<sup>391</sup> However, the heroic image is not the only element to which our attention is drawn. Unlike *Action Comics* #1, this cover features speech balloons that offer a different perspective on the character. Spider-Man exclaims "though the world may mock Peter Parker, the timid teen-ager... it will soon marvel at the awesome might of Spider-Man!" These words hint at hubris, while indicating anxieties that the bombastic costume conceals.

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<sup>390</sup> Stan Lee (w) and Steve Ditko (a), 'Spider-Man', *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (August 1962) (repr. in Budiansky (ed.) *Marvel Masterworks Volume 1*, pp. 1-13).

<sup>391</sup> Stephens, 'Spider-Man', p. 251.



Figure 47 The cover of Amazing Fantasy #15

Another disjoint exists between the image and the comic book's interior art. The cover is drawn in bold lines by Jack Kirby, who is widely celebrated for depicting muscular heroes in kinetic compositions.<sup>392</sup> Stan Lee has frequently stated that, due to the inherent heroicness of Kirby's drawings, he opted for a different artist for Spider-Man, as 'I didn't want this character to look like your usual superhero. I just wanted him to be a shy teenager, who wasn't too handsome'.<sup>393</sup> The interior art on Spider-Man is, for his debut and *The Amazing Spider-Man #1-38*, drawn by Steve Ditko, who utilises thinner lines and frailer figures.<sup>394</sup> On the opening splash page (a single or double page that acts as a complete panel unto itself) of the Spider-Man story in *Amazing Fantasy #15* a lanky Peter stands apart from peers who mock him [Figure 48]. Behind Peter is a panel within the panel, containing a silhouette of an assertive figure, a web and a spider. The heroically poised figure's head is in the centre of the web, which the spider descends toward. While all three of these omens bear down on Peter, promising greatness while foreboding danger, they also form a chain in which the silhouette of the hero is itself prey to the spider. This composition suggests that even the heroic identity looming in Peter's future will suffer under the weight of his powers. The opening glimpses of Spider-Man and Peter in *Amazing Fantasy #15* thus juxtapose contrasting styles and signs to evoke tensions such as hero and victim, power and burden, that the character is caught between.

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<sup>392</sup> For an analysis of Kirby's style, and the significant influence it had on the development of art in superhero comic books, see Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), pp. 29-49.

<sup>393</sup> Stan Lee, interviewed by Tom DeFalco in *Comics Creators on Spider-Man* (London: Titan Books, 2004), p. 12. When asked by DeFalco why Kirby provided the cover image, Lee's memory characteristically fails him, but he assumes that he rationalised giving the comic a dramatic Kirby cover would give it a better chance of selling.

<sup>394</sup> Stan Lee (w) and Steve Ditko (a), *The Amazing Spider-Man #1-38* (New York: Marvel Comics, March 1963-July 1966).

# SPIDER-MAN!



LIKE COSTUME HEROES? CONFIDENTIALLY, WE IN THE COMIC MAG BUSINESS REFER TO THEM AS "LONG UNDERWEAR CHARACTERS"! AND, AS YOU KNOW, THEY'RE A DIME A DOZEN! BUT, WE THINK YOU MAY FIND OUR **SPIDERMAN** JUST A BIT... DIFFERENT!

SAY, GANG, WE NEED ONE MORE GUY FOR THE DANCE! HOW ABOUT **PETER PARKER** OVER THERE?

ARE YOU **KIDDIN'?** THAT BOOKWORM WOULDN'T KNOW A CHA-CHA FROM A WALTZ!

**PETER PARKER?** HE'S MIDTOWN HIGH'S ONLY PROFESSIONAL WALL FLOWER!



Stan Lee + S. DITKO

v-789 1

Figure 48 The opening splash page of 'Spider-Man!' in Amazing Fantasy #15



Whereas the opening page of Superman's first comic book adventure exhibited his abilities, the first page of Spider-Man's foregrounds Peter's problems. This trend continues as Spider-Man's origin unravels over eleven pages. While metaphorically *Superman* suggests that the everyman can transcend that which constricts him by unleashing his inner hero, most of Peter's problems are not escaped, but instead exacerbated and multiplied, when he becomes Spider-Man. Peter initially uses his powers to help himself and those he cares for, shunning the world that shunned him, by attaining wealth through televised displays of his abilities. However, his refusal to stop a robber is punished in a cruel act of fate when the same robber kills Uncle Ben. Stephens observes that, while this event imbues Spider-Man with the same sense of unassailable guilt over the death of his father figure as Batman, Peter is far more responsible for his uncle's death than Bruce is for his father's.<sup>395</sup> Peter could have prevented Ben's death if he had assisted a stranger and as such learns, in the final panel of his first adventure, in a line that became his most resonant worded identifier, "with great power there must also come -- great responsibility!" The image in this panel shows Spider-Man walking alone down a moonlit street [Figure 49], pointedly recalling the Western trope of the hero riding off into the sunset at the end of the film. Like other superheroes, Spider-Man therefore exhibits his roots in a familiar American archetype, but amplifies and reframes as tragedy the isolation engendered by the superhero/Western's individualism.



Figure 49 The final panel of 'Spider-Man' in *Amazing Fantasy* #15

Following *Amazing Fantasy* #15, Peter/Spider-Man's adventures continue in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, which debuted in 1962. As the series develops Peter becomes much less socially ostracised, and indeed something of a heartthrob. Peter attracts the affections of various girls including, in Silver Age *Spider-*

<sup>395</sup> Stephens, 'Spider-Man', p. 254.

*Man* comic books, Betty Brant, Liz Allen, Gwen Stacy and Mary Jane Watson. High school concerns also stopped being a focal point even before Ditko left the title in 1966, with Peter graduating from high school in 1965's *The Amazing Spider-Man* #28.<sup>396</sup> However, Peter's anxieties do not recede with these developments, but just change as he struggles to juggle his social life and new responsibilities. Peter's gradual aging in comic books enables creators to engage with different obstacles young adults face. The various facets of Peter/Spider-Man's life multiplied further and interacted in new ways, both within texts and between texts and media, as new incarnations of *Spider-Man* were created.

Spider-Man's most prominent incarnations have been in comic books and screen adaptations, both animated and live-action, although he also appeared in a range of other media, from newspaper strips and music LPs to videogames.<sup>397</sup> What follows is a brief outline of some of these incarnations, which sketches the shape and scope of the *Spider-Man* matrix. Some of these incarnations will be discussed further in the subsequent analysis of Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy.

Peter/Spider-Man has featured in scores of comic book titles since his debut. Two are of particular interest due to being produced concurrently to Raimi's films, and thus in the same sociopolitical context. Writer J. Michael Straczynski's run on *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2* is in the continuity started by Lee and Ditko in Marvel's central comic book universe, officially said to occur in reality number 616.<sup>398</sup> By this stage in the continuity Peter has aged to an adult, although youth concerns are brought back into focus when Peter gets a job as a science teacher at his old school.<sup>399</sup> Straczynski's run spans *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2* #30-58 and *The Amazing Spider-Man* #500-545 (the

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<sup>396</sup> Stan Lee (w) and Steve Ditko (a), 'The Menace of the Molten Mole Man!', *The Amazing Spider-Man* #28 (September 1965) (repr. in Sedlmeier (ed.), *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 3*, pp. 171-191).

<sup>397</sup> The range of incarnation of *Spider-Man* are summarised by Peaslee and Weiner, 'Introduction', pp. 8-9.

<sup>398</sup> The 616 universe encompasses the majority of Marvel's comic books, including titles such as *The Fantastic Four* and *The Amazing Spider-Man* that debuted in the 1960s. The Earth on which the majority of their heroes live is thus called Earth 616. Alternate universes are given other numbers. This designation mirrors DC's labelling of different Earths from parallel universes as Earth-One, Earth-Two, Earth-Three, etc. It is significant that each of these publishers maintain a model of a multiverse that allows for endless variations of characters, but manages this multiplicity by separating these variations into clearly numbered universes.

<sup>399</sup> Generally speaking, Straczynski's run is a blend of, on the one hand, stories with strong themes of magic and mysticism, and on the other hand stories with a more social realist edge. The stories concerning Peter's students generally fall into this latter camp.

series was renumbered from the 500th anniversary issue and onwards), 2001-2007.<sup>400</sup> Although Straczynski co-wrote some issues with other writers, and various artists worked on the run, I refer to the run as Straczynski's for the sake of economy, since he was the constant creative voice throughout his tenure.<sup>401</sup> Elsewhere, *Ultimate Spider-Man* is set in Marvel's 'Ultimate' universe, officially designated as reality 1610.<sup>402</sup> Marvel's Ultimate line was launched in 2000, reportedly since, with *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* films due to be released, the publisher was concerned that new fans would not find the characters' 616 incarnations accessible.<sup>403</sup> *Ultimate Spider-Man* re-envisioned Peter/Spider-Man's story from its teenage origins, resituating the narrative in a contemporary setting. *Ultimate Spider-Man* was written by Brian Michael Bendis with art by Mark Bagley throughout the period in which Raimi's films were released. I will refer to it as *Ultimate Spider-Man* due to its unique name that signifies a contemporary perspective on the character.<sup>404</sup> Straczynski's run and *Ultimate Spider-Man* demonstrate that *Spider-Man* texts can reframe adolescent issues, offering different perspectives that are influenced by diegetic and/or real world developments.

There were five animated Spider-Man television series' released prior to Raimi's *Spider-Man*.<sup>405</sup> Since *Spider-Man* (ABC, 1967-1970), *Spider-Man* (first-run syndication, 1981-1982) and *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* (Fox, 1994-1998) have very similar titles, they can be more clearly identified by the year in which they debuted (e.g. 'the 1967 animated series'). These each begin with a premise familiar from Silver Age *Spider-Man* comics, in which Peter juggles living with Aunt May, being a freelance photographer for the *Daily Bugle* and fighting crime as Spider-Man. The unique titles of the other two animated series, *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* (NBC, 1981-1983) and *Spider-Man Unlimited*

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<sup>400</sup> J. Michael Straczynski (w), Fiona Avery (w), John Romita Jr, et al. *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2* #30-58 and *The Amazing Spider-Man* #500-545 (New York: Marvel Comics, June 2001-January 2008).

<sup>401</sup> The run featured artwork from various artists. The regular artists who contributed to the most issues were John Romita Jr. (#30-#508), Mike Deodato (#509-528) and Ron Garney (#529-#543).

<sup>402</sup> The Ultimate Universe is designated Earth 1610 in Marvel's multiverse.

<sup>403</sup> Howe, *Marvel Comics*, p. 404.

<sup>404</sup> Bagley drew the series until #111. Volume 1 of the series ended when Peter Parker was apparently killed by Green Goblin in *Ultimate Spider-Man* #160. Bibliographical details for Volume 1 are as follows: Brian Michael Bendis (w), Bill Jemas (w), Mark Bagley (p), et al. *Ultimate Spider-Man* #1-160 (New York: Marvel Comics, October 2000-August 2011).

<sup>405</sup> Spider-Man also appears in episodes of *Spider-Woman* (ABC, 1979-1980).

(Fox, 1999-2001) indicate their distinct premises. In the former Peter Parker lives, and fights crime, with Bobby Drake and Angelica Jones, mutants Iceman and Firestar from the X-Men, while the latter is set on a futuristic Counter-Earth. These incarnations therefore subvert common traits of *Spider-Man* texts, such as Peter/Spider-Man's isolation, and negotiation of contemporary issues. The five animated series feature Peter at a range of different stages in his life, from high school in *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* to college in the 1994 animated series, and as a young adult who has finished his education in *Spider-Man Unlimited*.

The three live-action incarnations prior to 2002 were produced in the 1970s. Spider-Man appears in short segments titled 'Spidey Super Stories' on television series *The Electric Company* (PBS, 1971-1977). These pare down the character to the basics of his costume, powers and role as crime fighter, never featuring Peter Parker or the extended cast. Television series *The Amazing Spider-Man* (CBS, 1977-1979) changes many of the supporting characters, and does not featuring any of Spider-Man's famous supervillains. Yet the series places familiar concerns and elements, such as the strain of juggling the Peter/Superman identities, and Peter's employment at the *Daily Bugle* while also attending college, in this new framework. Like the cartoons that signify their familiar premise with unadorned titles, this incarnation can be identified by the year it debuted. The most seemingly aberrant screen adaptation is Japanese television series *Supaidāman* (TV Tokyo, 1978-1979). This series radically alters the premise to more closely resemble a strain of the superhero genre that is particular to Japanese television, which at the time was in its infancy, and would come to be known as the 'Super Sentai' series.<sup>406</sup> *Supaidāman* replaces Peter Parker with Takuya Yamashiro (Shinji Tōdō), who has his powers, along with a spaceship called Marveller, which transforms into a giant robot named Leopardon, bestowed on him by Garia (Toshiaki Nishizawa), who followed Professor Monster (Mitsuo Andō) and

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<sup>406</sup> Jonathan Clements and Motoko Tamamura discuss the genesis of the Super Sentai series, including a chronology for the subgenre, which started with *Goranger* (Asahi, 1975-1977), in *The Dorama Encyclopaedia: A Guide to Japanese TV Drama since 1953* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2003), pp. xxii-xxiii. The Super Sentai is most familiar in western culture from the *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* franchise, which intercuts footage of battles from Super Sentai series with footage of an English-speaking cast when the heroes are out of costume.

the Iron Cross Army to Earth after they destroyed his home, Planet Spider. This premise certainly supports David Ray Carter's claim that *Supaidāman* 'dispensed with every aspect of the Spider-Man character, save the costume'.<sup>407</sup> However, while exhibiting and prefiguring many traits of the Super Sentai series (and thus influencing the development of Japanese superhero conventions, similarly to how Silver Age *Spider-Man* comic books significantly impacted American conventions), *Supaidāman* also departs from the formula, most notably through featuring a lone hero, rather than a team.<sup>408</sup> Takuya's isolation draws a potent comparison to Peter Parker, while both have their loneliness emphasised, and motivation to fight evil fuelled, by the death of a father figure.<sup>409</sup> Thus, this most deviant of *Spider-Man* texts pushes the boundaries of the *Spider-Man* matrix, but connects with other incarnations in more ways than just iconography, exhibiting a unique interplay between American *Spider-Man* texts and Japanese superhero conventions.<sup>410</sup>

The *Spider-Man* matrix has had its parameters expanded by incarnations with traits and premises not evident in previous *Spider-Man* texts, but even these more subversive texts exhibit qualities that link them back to Silver Age *Spider-Man* comic books. The ways that *Spider-Man* comic books in the 1960s reconfigured superhero conventions continue to be deployed and reworked as *Spider-Man* is adapted

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<sup>407</sup> David Ray Carter, 'Reinterpreting Myths in *Spider-Man: The Animated Series*', in Peaslee and Weiner (ed.), *Web-Spinning Heroics*, p. 211.

<sup>408</sup> Jonathan Clements and Motoko Tamamura translate sentai as 'battle team'. The lack of such a team in *Supaidāman* seems a large determining factor in them not directly including the show, but still referring to it, in their chronology of Super Sentai series. Clements and Tamamura, *The Dorama Encyclopaedia*, p. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>409</sup> This trauma is doubled for Takuya, with the first episode seeing both his biological father, and mentor Garia, die. The series' melancholic end credits music echoes this trauma, with notions of isolation and paternal death emphasised in the lyrics:

Echoing in depths of darkness, the footsteps of hell  
Under a grave marker, lies my father  
I hide in my heart, my callous fate  
Goodbye my friend, my eternal friend  
All alone, all alone  
I run through the deserted lands

This translation is from the subtitled version of the series uploaded to Marvel.com in 2009.

<sup>410</sup> For a detailed analysis of ways in which U.S. and Japanese superhero cultures interact in *Supaidāman*, see Rayna Denison, 'American Superheroes in Japanese Hands: Superhero Genre Hybridity as Superhero Systems Collide in *Supaidāman*', in Rayna Denison and Rachel Mizsei-Ward (ed.), *Superheroes on World Screens* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2015), pp. 53-72.

into different formats and interacts with new cultural contexts. In the 2000s, digital filmmaking technologies provided fresh tools with which to metamorphose these conventions.

### The Digitally Rendered Superhero

The majority of Spider-Man's screen adaptations, from the 1967 animated series to *Supaidāman*, parade the character's iconography in their opening title sequences through devices such as close ups on his mask and logo, and having credits appear over a web motif. The opening of Raimi's *Spider-Man* functions similarly. A virtual camera soars and swerves around digitally rendered space comprised of spider webs, glimpses of Spider-Man and supervillain Green Goblin, and New York.<sup>411</sup> The colour palette is dominated by bright reds and blues, apart from Green Goblin's green face, foregrounding the iconic colours of Spider-Man and his adversary.<sup>412</sup> The rapid propulsion through this phantasmagorical environment exhibits traits of *Bukatman's* kaleidoscopic effects sequence. The rush through space that opened *Superman: The Movie* is therefore recalled, but transformed through the virtual camera's twisting movements. From the very opening of Raimi's *Spider-Man*, digital technology is foregrounded as a key means for metamorphosing *Spider-Man* and tropes of the superhero blockbuster in spectacular new ways.

### *Issues of Realism*

The particular ontological qualities of digital images, in relation to those of photographic and drawn images, arguably influence their reception and construction. As discussed in my review of literature, photographic images are often deemed objective and realistic due to their indexicality, while drawn images are viewed as subjective and stylised. This separation contends that certain content is better suited to different images: photographic images present realistic narratives, drawn images are equipped to deal with fantasy. The distinction is rooted in the nature of an image's production. Bazin

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<sup>411</sup> I will often refer to movements created by a virtual camera simply as camera movements. Aylish Wood determines that, since virtual cameras perform the same basic movements as physical cameras (tracks, pans, zooms, etc.), it is appropriate to discuss them using the same terminology. Aylish Wood, *Digital Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 166.

<sup>412</sup> It is not coincidental that Superman's and Spider-Man's costumes are both red and blue, while the dangers of kryptonite and the Green Goblin are green. The heroes' costumes evoke patriotism by utilising the colours of the American flag, while green provides a stark contrast to these colours, thereby allowing the adversarial nature of what it represents to be clearly signified.

argues that the photographic image is objective due to being produced through an automatic process that occurs without human intervention.<sup>413</sup> Lev Manovich situates digitally constructed images in the subjective category, arguing that, due to being manually constructed by human artists, they have less in common with traditional photographs than with painting.<sup>414</sup> Like drawn images, CGI is not an indexical representation of profilmic material ('a figure, object or scene that actually was in front of a camera in the real world'<sup>415</sup>) but the product of human imagination. The fact that many modern films are shot on digital cameras, and comics drawn using digital processes, eliminates material distinctions between image types; each is formed from intangible numerical data. However, the different methods of production, and ontological qualities they affix, largely remain. Digital photography still captures profilmic phenomena with a camera, digital techniques for creating comics art typically emulate traditional drawing methods whereby the artist forms lines and shapes on a two-dimensional surface, while CGI entails rendering three-dimensional objects and space.

It is important to acknowledge that individual images do not have to be produced using only one of these techniques. Different kinds of image types can be combined in composite images. The nature of image compositing exposes the instability of discourses of photographic indexicality. Lisa Purse explains that the practice of compositing different profilmic elements together, or with artificial elements, to provide an illusion of indexicality, when in fact a camera did not capture the finished shot in one take, was accomplished using analogue methods from the early days of cinema.<sup>416</sup> Purse argues that the history and nature of compositing undermines the commonly held binary separation of celluloid photography and digital images, revealing that both can offer a hybrid indexicality.<sup>417</sup> For example, the compositing process in Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy means that photographic representations of New York are interspersed in, and mapped onto, a digital construct of the city.<sup>418</sup> A

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<sup>413</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>414</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 295.

<sup>415</sup> Lisa Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 6.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>418</sup> While the narrative of the trilogy is exclusively set in New York, some scenes were shot in other U.S. cities, such as Los Angeles or Chicago, and others on sets. Therefore, throughout the trilogy, whether scenes feature

variety of digital, profilmic, and digital/profilmic hybrid bodies, populate this space. The films' composite New York thus welds indexical representations of profilmic material with digitally rendered phenomena.

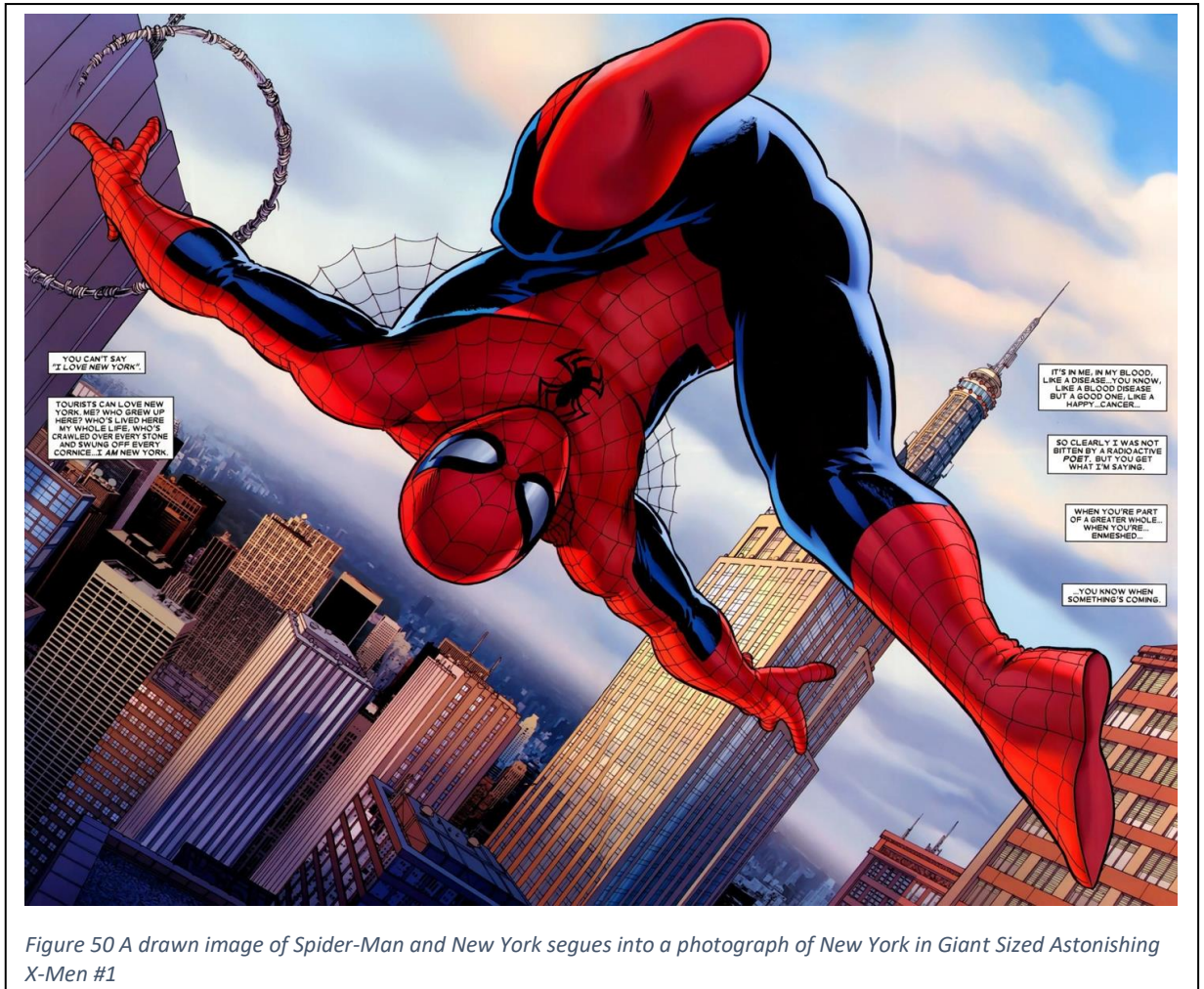
While images in comic books are generally constructed from scratch, drawn and photographic elements can be combined, as is evident in John Cassaday's splash page depicting Spider-Man in *Giant-Size Astonishing X-Men* #1 [Figure 50].<sup>419</sup> In the foreground, Spider-Man is drawn in an acrobatic pose above the roofs of skyscrapers. In the background, the drawn skyscrapers merge into a photographic representation of New York. The geometric precision of the drawn skyscrapers enables them to segue into the photographic ones, while the diagonal angle in which Spider-Man's body is positioned matches the tilted perspective from which the skyscrapers are presented.

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heavy CGI, more discreet digital compositing, or no digital manipulation at all, the film's indexical relationship to New York is always potentially partly masqueraded.

<sup>419</sup> Joss Whedon (w), John Cassaday (a) and Laura Martin (c), 'Gone', *Giant-Size Astonishing X-Men* #1 (New York: Marvel Comics, July 2008).





The intermingling of artificial and photographic elements in Raimi's films and Cassaday's panel evokes the figure of the superhero's dichotomous relation to modernity. The ontological disjunction between Spider-Man's drawn or digitally rendered body and Manhattan's indexical qualities situate hero and city as oppositions. Spider-Man's superhumanly acrobatic form provides him with the power to freely traverse, and thus conquer, the oppressive structures of industrialization. Conversely, stylistic continuities between body and cityscape, such as seamless segues between artificial and indexical elements, present them as reciprocal realisations of modernity's promises fulfilled. Jason Bainbridge discusses the centrality of New York to the Marvel universe, arguing that Spider-Man in particular has a symbiotic bond with New York.<sup>420</sup> Bainbridge presents Cassaday's panel to demonstrate this bond.

<sup>420</sup> Jason Bainbridge. "'I am New York' – Spider-Man, New York City and the Marvel Universe', in Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling (ed.), *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence* (New York: Continuum, 2010), pp. 163-179.

The comparable compositing process used to synthesise superhero and city in Raimi's films rearticulates this prominent theme from the *Spider-Man* matrix. Image compositing can thus produce ontologically complex compositions that are rich in meaning.

While maintaining ontological specificity allows different image elements to generate meaning when composited together, image types should not be thought of in binary terms as being either objective and photographic or subjective and stylised. I have already discussed in my review of literature how McCloud's discussion of the potential for images to be stylised in different ways provides a means of challenging the binary separation of different image types. While McCloud demonstrates that drawn images can be realistic, symbolic or abstract, subjective inflections are evident in photographic images. Subjectivity intervenes before a photograph is taken, with the photographer deciding camera placement and framing. Stephen Prince notes ways that human agency can continue to shape the photographic image after it has been captured: '[f]or example, flashing film prior to development or dodging and burning portions of the image during printing will produce lighting effects that did not exist in the scene that was photographed'.<sup>421</sup> These subjective alterations have existed since the birth of photography, although they have been expanded as the medium has developed and entered the digital age. Traditionally, different production processes inhibit photographic images from taking on symbolic and abstract qualities as easily as drawn images. However, Burke's discussion of film's ability to recreate the stylisation of comics emphasises the role digital filmmaking technologies have played in enabling filmmakers to freely manipulate the cinematic image, leading to many twenty-first century comic book adaptations having highly stylised aesthetics that recall their source medium.<sup>422</sup>

Cultural associations of drawn images with subjectivity and comics with extravagant fantasy arguably permit heavy stylization in films that present themselves as comic book adaptations. These permissions exist in tension with the pervasive cultural tendency to equate the photographic image

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<sup>421</sup> Stephen Prince, 'True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory', *Film Quarterly*, 49:3 (Spring 1996), p. 34.

<sup>422</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, pp. 203-214.

with realism, which potentially restricts the degree to which CGI can mould and stylise imagery in live-action film. The ontological properties of film are such that realism should not be thought of as solely dictated by an image's appearance. Film's capacity to present movement offers a kind of realism not apparent in still images, while the specific qualities of movement in live-action cinema present a new set of criteria that determine CGI's construction.

Tom Gunning proposes that a concept of cinematic realism based on movement rather than indexicality is more instructive when theorising cinema in the age of digital imaging, as it is inclusive of forms of filmmaking that are not based on filming profilmic phenomena.<sup>423</sup> Gunning builds on Christian Metz's discussion of motion and temporality being central to cinema's 'impression of reality'.<sup>424</sup> This notion of cinema offering an *impression* of reality is a significant move away from the *reproduction* of reality that Bazinian thinking attributes to the photographic image. Metz argues that, while the photographic image connotes pastness, the moving image offers a sense of presence.<sup>425</sup> Gunning adds that '[m]otion always has a projective aspect, a progressive movement in a direction, and therefore invokes possibility and a future... we could say that through a moving image, the progress of motion is projected onto us'.<sup>426</sup> Motion occurs in both space and time whether in a film or reality. We cannot contemplate moving images in the same way that we do still images, because to engage with moving images is to be involved in their progression into the future, which advances in tandem with the progression of reality. Gunning asserts that our participation in motion is a visceral sensation, as we do not just see but also feel it.<sup>427</sup> Since this participation occurs regardless of the kind of movement that is being presented, '[m]otion therefore need not be realistic to have a "realistic" effect, that is, to invite the emphatic participation, both imaginative and physiological, of viewers'.<sup>428</sup> Following

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<sup>423</sup> Tom Gunning, 'Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality', *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 18:1, pp. 29-52.

<sup>424</sup> Christian Metz, in *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 3-15. The essay featured within these pages is titled 'On the Impression of Reality in Cinema'.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

<sup>426</sup> Gunning, 'Moving Away from the Index', pp. 42-43.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Gunning, we participate in digitally rendered fantastical movements in the same way as profilmic movements. Kinetic phenomena that do not exist physically, such as Spider-Man's acrobatics, thus provide an impression of reality.

Gunning's inclusive conceptualization of cinematic movement in the abstract sense ignores specific qualities of movements. These qualities are of great importance when we consider the expense, time and artistry devoted to ensuring digitally rendered forms in Hollywood films move in ways that adhere to laws of physics. This commitment suggests that, due to the cinematic image's kinesis aligning with the audience's experience of time and motion, there is also an imperative for the particularities of CGI's movements to match this experience. Prince's notion of 'perceptual realism' provides a useful framework for the criteria informing special effects artists' attempts to create realistic CGI:

A perceptually real image is one which structurally corresponds to the viewer's audiovisual experience of three-dimensional space... Such images display a nested hierarchy of cues which organize the display of light, color, texture, movement, and sound in ways that correspond with the viewer's own understanding of these phenomena in daily life.<sup>429</sup>

This notion goes beyond issues of photorealism, which Manovich explains as 'the industry term for synthetic images that look as though they were created using traditional photography or cinematography'.<sup>430</sup> Photorealistic images are constructed to look like an indexical presentation of a physical referent by adopting a realistic style and mimicking conventions of photography, such as motion blur and lens flare. Prince's conceptualisation of perceptual realism focuses not just on the appearance of the image, but on the behaviour of diegetic phenomena. Prince contends that the diegetic world of a film can be presented and received as realistic through the ways it corresponds with its audience's audiovisual and physical experience of the world they inhabit. Both profilmic and digitally rendered material in "realist" or "fantasy" films can exhibit these correspondences.<sup>431</sup> As such, even fantastic phenomena that audiences know have no physical referent can be presented as realistic

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<sup>429</sup> Prince, 'True Lies', p. 32.

<sup>430</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, p. 179.

<sup>431</sup> Prince, 'True Lies', p. 32.

by appearing and sounding as if subject to real physical forces. The vital role movement plays in this process is of particular interest to me. No real human can swing from organic webbing emitted from their wrists. However, a central factor contributing to the perceptually realistic presentation of Spider-Man's actions is that he soars, dips and dives as if subject to Earth's gravitational pull.

The abstract and specific qualities of movement in films draw conceptual comparisons to techniques used to convey movement in comics. I have already discussed ways that superhero comics can evoke abstract sensations of motion and indicate specific movements. In regard to the former, Andrei Molotiu's concepts of iconostasis and sequential dynamism combine to describe ways in which comics pages can present expressive compositions imbued with kinesis.<sup>432</sup> Examples of the latter include devices such as motion lines, multiple figures mapping different stages of a movement and action-to-action transitions. A double splash page from *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2 #33*, drawn by John Romita Jr., combines elements of these strategies [Figure 51].<sup>433</sup> An array of overlapping figures shows different moves in Spider-Man's battle against supervillain Morlun. While captions arranged in a steepening arc direct the reader's eyes from the top-left to the bottom-right, movement occurs chaotically in all directions, creating competing trajectories. Individual figures depict specific movements, such as punches and grapples. At points movements continue from one figure to the next, such as in the bottom-right where Spider-Man hits Morlun with a chunk of rubble, only to see Morlun unharmed as the rubble shatters around him in the image to the right. However, in general the overlapping figures bear no explicit causal relation to one another. By refusing to present a clear temporal flow of events, the page functions as a unified composition that conveys expressive kinesis rather than progression. The combination of specific moves, suspended from a clear temporal flow, with an abstract sense of motion showcases the ability and unrelenting stamina of both characters, while suggesting a potentially endless battle.

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<sup>432</sup> Molotiu, 'Abstract Form'. See my review of literature for my discussion of Molotiu.

<sup>433</sup> J. Michael Straczynski (w), John Romita Jr. (p), Scott Hanna (i), et al., 'All Fall Down', *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2 #33* (New York: Marvel Comics, September 2001).

Figure 51 A range of strategies convey movement as Spider-Man battles Morlun in *The Amazing Spider-Man: Volume 2* #33



Although ontologically distinct from comics, the projective temporal flow and specific qualities of Spider-Man's digital body's movements in the film trilogy can create similar effects. As Spider-Man first swings from a skyscraper in pursuit of a criminal following Uncle Ben's murder, the virtual camera

circulates tumultuously around his airborne body. The disorientating competing motion of camera and body involves the viewer in an energetic flurry, while creating particular sensations such as giddiness and vertigo that are augmented by relations between body and space. Arcs formed as Spider-Man gains momentum on downward swings that propel him back upward recall those of a pendulum, thus simulating the effect of gravity on the movements of weighted objects. Spider-Man's at first clumsy, but increasingly assured, negotiation of obstacles – including buildings, streetlamps and bridges – test his superpowers in a familiar environment to acclimatise both superhero and audience to his movements. The camera reflects Spider-Man's growing acquaintance with his abilities by gaining a greater sense of stability as the sequence develops, for instance following from behind as he progresses down the street. The street's linearity enables a clear mapping of Spider-Man's spatial trajectory and gauging of his speed. He overtakes cars moving in the same direction, the narrative of pursuit emphasising temporal urgency. While comics can convey Spider-Man's energy and showcase his agility by holding him in stasis, film offers comparable sensations and displays by having him move through space and time in ways that are at once expressive, spectacular and perceptually realistic.

It is also significant that the attempts to perceptually realistically simulate gravity grants Spider-Man's digital body a sense of weight that is lacking in the ethereal gliding of Reeve's pro-filmic body in *Superman: The Movie*. The special effects that present the two superheroes' powers thus further undermine the argument that digital images are removed from reality while photographic images are realistic. Digital bodies can be constructed to correspond with our understanding of physics, while pro-filmic bodies can be presented in ways that subvert gravity. Again, it is the specific stylisation of an image, in this case by the nature of the special effects used in its creation, that constructs its relation to reality.

As the above analysis demonstrates, cinematic movement's expressive sensations must be considered alongside the specific nature of the motion when analysing the realistic qualities of CGI. Considering these features moves us away from arguments that realism is determined by ontological qualities that

are inherent to different image types. Rather, these features can be configured to convey different levels of realism and thus different kinds of content.

However, the ontological qualities of CGI contribute meaning to films in ways that are not accounted for in, but can be considered alongside, Gunning and Prince's conceptual frameworks. By focusing on the visceral experience and visual reception of moving images, respectively, neither Gunning nor Prince discuss intellectual processes in which audiences are engaged. While notions of indexicality rely on the spectator's understanding of the automatic process of photography, Gunning's conceptualisation of cinematic movement's impression of reality 'depends on "forgetting" (that is, on distracting the viewer's attention away from – not literally repressing the knowledge of) the technical process of filming in favour of an experience of the fictional world as present'.<sup>434</sup> Meanwhile, Prince's use of the word 'perceptual' conjures echoes of the pervasive perceptual/conceptual divide of images and words.

Other scholars argue that CGI does not just distract audiences with phenomena to be appreciated for their surface value. Dan North argues that special effects have a reflexive function, encouraging audiences to conceptually interrogate the image's form.<sup>435</sup> Elsewhere, Aylish Wood uses the terms 'seamless' and 'inscribed' to describe how digitally created images can seek to be transparent in their construction or draw attention to their form.<sup>436</sup> Both North and Wood propose that, through inviting audiences to marvel at special effects, films prompt an active awareness of the technology through which they were created, which encourages new levels of engagement with the filmic text. As with other kinds of image, CGI can therefore be constructed to elicit conceptual processing. The particular ontological qualities of CGI typically situate the technologies through which the images were created

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<sup>434</sup> Gunning, 'Moving Away from the Index', p. 47.

<sup>435</sup> Dan North, *Performing Illusions: Cinema, Special Effects and the Virtual Actor* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>436</sup> Wood, *Digital Encounters*, p. 6. Manovich offers a comparable distinction between illusionistic representation and interface (*The Language of New Media*, p. 290). However, Manovich only discusses digital imaging in Hollywood films in terms of illusionistic representation, and reserves discussion of digital images that act as interfaces for media such as music videos and CD ROMs. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, p. 290 and pp. 311-314.



as a focal point for audience reflection. Conceptual processing can be encouraged by the perceptual qualities of the image; fantastic phenomena that exhibit a high degree of perceptual realism invite appreciation of the technology and artistry that went into their creation.

Prompting audiences to acknowledge the CGI itself, not just the diegetic phenomena it presents, is a continuation of the New Hollywood blockbuster strategy of asserting scale and expense through grand displays of spectacle.<sup>437</sup> However, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the form that spectacle takes in New Hollywood blockbusters is not separate from, but can augment, narrative meaning. Consequently, conceptual interrogation of CGI does not necessarily occur separately from narrative comprehension.

A key way that the *Spider-Man* trilogy showcases digital filmmaking technologies are sustained long takes that bounce and circle around the hero. The longest of these occur in the first film's last, and second film's penultimate, shots, which last roughly thirty and forty seconds, respectively. Orit Fussfeld Cohen contends that the artifice of digital effects can be concealed through fast editing, which 'prevents the spectator from perceiving the conjoined, digitally manipulated compound shot as a computer-generated product'.<sup>438</sup> Following Cohen, the prolonged takes of *Spider-Man* conversely foreground their digital inscription. The particular qualities of the camera movements intensify this emphasis. The movements compare to those in inscribed long takes that Wood analyses from *Monsters, Inc.* (Pete Docter, David Silverman and Lee Unkrich, 2001) and *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird,

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<sup>437</sup> It should be noted that discourses on the construction of special effects obtained enhanced visibility in the digital age with the advent of DVD technology. As outlined by Wood (*Digital Encounters*, pp. 43-44) and North (*Performing Illusions*, pp. 11-12 and pp. 181-182), DVDs make the presence of technology much more evident through both the ability they offer to navigate the image and special features that foreground discussions of special effects. In regard to the enhanced engagement with special effects that these elements facilitate, North says 'the fascinated spectator is the involved spectator: the 'wow factor' can only sustain a certain level of interest, and it is the behind-the-scenes information which supplements and reinforces the technological meta-narrative that underpins all spectacular cinema' (*Performing Illusions*, p. 178).

<sup>438</sup> Orit Fussfeld Cohen, 'The New Language of the Digital Film', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 42:1 (2014), p. 55. Interestingly, this argument inverts Bazin's view on montage. Bazin sees montage as offering an aesthetic of artifice by cutting up representational space, whereas deep focus and long takes keep space intact (Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 50). Cohen's and Bazin's arguments are compatible in their agreement that long takes draw attention to an image's ontological qualities.

2004) that exhibit an aesthetic ‘that is about “showing off” the latest possibilities of technologies’.<sup>439</sup> The sweeping movement and rapid progression that Wood outlines in shots from *Monsters, Inc.*, and ‘untethered quality’ of a shot that falls from mid-air in *The Incredibles*, are all devices deployed in the shots from Raimi’s *Spider-Man* films.<sup>440</sup> The camera’s elaborate movements are a marker of the technology used to create the shots, while its swooping and bouncing align with Spider-Man’s movements, at points going so far as to replicate the trajectories of his swinging. The dynamic, unbroken motion of the camera and Spider-Man’s body also emphasize their lack of physical restraints such as cranes and wires. The narrative about the digital construction and navigation of complex composite spaces thus entwines with the diegetic narrative concerning Spider-Man’s mastery of space. As North similarly outlines, the powers of the technology and Spider-Man are in a reciprocal relationship as they draw attention to each other, engaging audiences in both simultaneously.<sup>441</sup>

The fluid, continuous movements of camera and superhero in these shots recall and develop the trope used in *Superman: The Movie’s* to present the superhero’s flight in long takes. *Superman: The Movie* deploys kaleidoscopic rotations of superhero and city alongside head-on propulsion to assert superiority over previous *Superman* texts. Raimi’s *Spider-Man* films build on this strategy, metamorphosing Superman’s flight motif through multiplying the camera’s and superhero’s trajectories, thus presenting its spectacle as superior not just to previous *Spider-Man* texts, but also previous superhero blockbusters. North discusses this phenomena as the intertextual dimension of special effects, where the impressive spectacle of a particular effect ‘depends upon the existence of relatively unsophisticated antecedents for its full effect’.<sup>442</sup> A moment in Raimi’s *Spider-Man* when

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<sup>439</sup> Wood, *Digital Encounters*, p. 25.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26. The shots from *Monsters Inc.* to which Wood refers are from a sequence in which Sulli (John Goodman), Boo (Mary Gibbs) and Mike (Billy Crystal) are carried along the rails of the ‘door store’. Doors that act as portals between the monsters’ world and the humans’ world are taken in and out of filing on a system of rails that speed, dip and curve in ways reminiscent of a roller coaster. The shot from *The Incredibles* to which Wood refers occurs after Mr. Incredible (Craig T. Nelson) has been summoned to an island: ‘In the sequence where Mr Incredible first journeys to the island, he lands on a lush green area. As Mr Incredible runs down a path following the slope of a hill, a camera shot plunges from mid-air down into the undergrowth’ (p. 26).

<sup>441</sup> North, *Performing Illusions*, pp. 166-169.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Peter runs toward the camera as he opens his shirt to reveal his Spider-Man costume [Figure 52] pays homage to *Superman: The Movie* while also identifying the prior film as a point of comparison for demonstrations of Spider-Man's powers. The strategies of bidding for centrality in a single superhero matrix and asserting the supremacy of blockbuster cinema are thus reconfigured into a bid for centrality within the range of superhero cinema. This intertextual function of the special effects is another way that their construction articulates extra-diegetic narratives that complement the diegetic narrative; both present Spider-Man as the most awe-inspiring example of a superhero.



Figure 52 Peter opens his shirt to reveal his Spider-Man costume in Raimi's *Spider-Man*

In the shots discussed above, the reciprocity of the digital filmmaking technology and Spider-Man is expressed through interlacing of the abstract, perceptual and conceptual qualities of digitally rendered movements. The giddy sensations of the swooping camera and Spider-Man's body combine with bounces that simulate the pull of gravity, while the elaborate qualities of each of these showcase the superior sophistication of the special effects. The theoretical approaches I have drawn together thus provide a nuanced appreciation of the interconnected functions of CGI in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films, demonstrating not just key ways that CGI can be presented as realistic, but also meanings that the

films' uses of CGI create or amplify. The bodies of Spider-Man and his villains provide significant sites through which the discourse inscribed into the films on the relationship between CGI and reality is expanded. Examining the presentation of these bodies also enables elucidation of how meanings created by the films' deployment of CGI metamorphose familiar traits of *Spider-Man* texts.

### *Digital and Profilmic Bodies*

The superhero body is a source of spectacle, from vivid costume and superior physique to performances of extraordinary movements. In live-action screen incarnations of *Spider-Man* prior to Raimi's films, this spectacle was presented by the profilmic bodies of actors or stuntmen. *Supaidāman* in particular utilises the profilmic body to give its superhero a distinctive presence. Rayna Denison describes Supaidāman's pauses to strike poses before or during fights as 'moments of character spectacle' that assign a set of identifying stances to the hero.<sup>443</sup> These pauses bookend and punctuate fluid fight sequences in which the superhero backflips and leaps around, acrobatically dispatching his enemies. Denison explains that the particular stunts and fighting moves Supaidāman exhibits combine with his poses to craft a 'unique and instantly recognisable performance style'.<sup>444</sup> I would add that the particular ways this style is presented showcase not just the character as spectacle, but also the physical performance of the actor or stuntman. While long takes in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films foreground the superhero body's digital construction, the long takes of physical acrobatics in *Supaidāman*, following Bazin, indicate to audiences that the events existed in reality, thus drawing viewer attention to the exceptional skill of the human performer.<sup>445</sup> The scale model work used to realise fights between the bodies of enlarged villains and Supaidāman's robot Marveller is an additional form of physical spectacle. These different kinds of spectacle foreground, and interweave, the diegetic skills of Supaidāman and extradiegetic skills of performers and special effects artists. Thus, even when the superhero body is solely profilmic, different kinds of complementary spectacle are

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<sup>443</sup> Denison, 'American Superheroes in Japanese Hands', p. 62. Denison also argues that these poses function intertextually, remediating the still imagery of superhero comics while deploying a trope of martial arts cinema.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>445</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 50.

employed to communicate characterisation, and present both superhero and supervillains as extraordinary. The interactions between digital and profilmic bodies, or digital and profilmic elements of bodies, in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films offer new ways to articulate characterisation and meaning.

The increased threat posed by Spider-Man's villains as the film trilogy progresses is marked on their bodies by increased use of digital imaging, thus developing the films' alignment of the power of digital filmmaking technologies with diegetic superpowers. In the first film, Norman Osborn/Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe) wears a physical costume that becomes a digital construct only in scenes where he is flying, much like Spider-Man. In the sequel, Otto Octavius/Doctor Octopus' (Alfred Molina) mechanical appendages, the aspects of his form that possess superhuman strength and agility, when static are a pro-filmic model, but once attached to his body become primarily animated through CGI. The arms' artificial intelligence overrides Otto's mental functions, while they often completely replace his own limbs, his limp body dangling as they carry it around, the human body a puppet for the digital on both a diegetic and non-diegetic level.

In Raimi's *Spider-Man 3*, the two villains' transformations are represented through digital manipulation of the body itself. The symbiote, like Doctor Octopus' arms, is a primarily digital construct that needs to attach to a human form to facilitate its interactions with physical space, but unlike the mechanical arms it digitally inscribes wearer Eddie Brock's (Topher Grace) profilmic body. When Eddie wears the symbiote and becomes Venom, the structure of his face morphs to one with reptilian aspects, gaping mouth stretching from ear to ear and filled with spiked teeth [Figure 53]. Flint Marko/Sandman's (Thomas Haden Church) powers are similarly realised through the human body morphing into a digital construct, but completes this process through his whole body being replaced with a fully malleable digitally realised entity.



*Figure 53 Venom's digitally inscribed reptilian face in Raimi's Spider-Man 3*

The scene in which Flint tries to reform his body from grains of sand dramatises the battle between the physical body and digital code. In a take that lasts for just under one minute and fifty seconds, the camera races in extreme close up after grains of sand that collect into a mass, before slowing as it moves back to circle the forming body. The grains act as digital data bits that have the power to replicate, or morph beyond recognition, physical matter. Flint struggles to form human appendages out of the grains. The melancholic mood evoked by his newfound detachment from humanity is augmented when, in a subsequent shot, he tries but fails to grasp a locket containing a photo of his daughter. Foregrounding the digital construction of the sand through take duration and emphasis on texture expresses Flint's disconnect from humanity as a victory of the digital over the physical. Once he has mastered his power, Flint is able to shape his body as he pleases, giving him an advantage over Spider-Man's fixed physical form. In the climactic battle Sandman becomes a giant digitally constructed ogre [Figure 54], divorcing himself of any kind of indexical relationship with a human body, while ensuring that he is literally, in terms of stature, the biggest threat in the trilogy.



Figure 54 Sandman morphs into a giant ogre in Raimi's *Spider-Man 3*

The narrative of advances in digital imaging technology therefore complements that of increased threats posed to Spider-Man as the trilogy progresses. As Spider-Man's villains' bodies are increasingly replaced by digital imaging the diegetic threat intensifies. In attributing the nefarious qualities of these villains to their digital inscriptions, which are repeatedly placed in opposition to their humanity, the films themselves express the physical/digital binary. However, the films also complicate and disassemble this dichotomy through the interactions between Spider-Man's body's physical and digital qualities. These interactions enable the realisation of Spider-Man's heroic feats, while metamorphosing characteristics other than just his powers.

The superhero's body in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films has provided a discussion point in discourses on the relation between the physical and the digital in Hollywood cinema. Two primary criteria that impact the reception of digital bodies emerge from Purse's discussion of critical responses to digital bodies in Hollywood cinema: the body must act and emote like a human or human-like being, and the body must believably inhabit its surroundings.<sup>446</sup> These criteria return us to discourses of perceptual realism. In each case, insufficient correspondences between digital bodies and real world experience disrupt a film's verisimilitude. Many of the critics Purse surveys identify these failings in the *Spider-Man* films. In the below analysis I examine ways in which Spider-Man's digital body is balanced against Tobey

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<sup>446</sup> Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema*, pp. 60-63.

Maguire's physical and emotive presence to mitigate the digital body's lack of humanity. In the proceeding section I will explore how Spider-Man's interactions with his surroundings develop as the film series progresses, and resonate thematically. The strategies I identify metamorphose key traits of *Spider-Man* comics, thus circumventing restrictions that expectations of perceptual realism place on live-action films freely adapting comic book content.

Purse explains that body language and facial expression are central to the combination of elements that contribute to the humanity of a body in film.<sup>447</sup> The digital body in Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy puts little effort into conveying this humanity, instead committing itself to grand displays of agility. Besides the difficulty of constructing a digital body to express human emotions, Spider-Man's costume provides a further barrier, completely covering the superhero's facial features. Aaron Taylor discusses ways in which Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy deploys Maguire's performance to surmount the expressive restriction of the digitised body and superhero's costume. Taylor argues that Maguire's performances of physical humour in scenes that feature the star in a profilmic Spider-Man costume, and having Spider-Man remove his mask to exhibit Maguire's facial expressions, are two strategies that showcase the idiosyncrasies of Maguire as performer, thus imbuing Spider-Man with the star's unique expressive qualities.<sup>448</sup>

Maguire's physicality is also asserted in scenes that display his muscular torso. The male physique as spectacle has itself become a trope of the superhero blockbuster. A dual function is again evident, whereby the diegetic journey of the hero is aligned with extra-diegetic recognition of the actor's training regime. Brooker demonstrates this double narrative in his analysis of the discourse surrounding *Batman Begins* that aligns Bruce Wayne's efforts to become Batman with the regime Christian Bale undertook for the role.<sup>449</sup> Characteristic of Brooker's approach, he only discusses how

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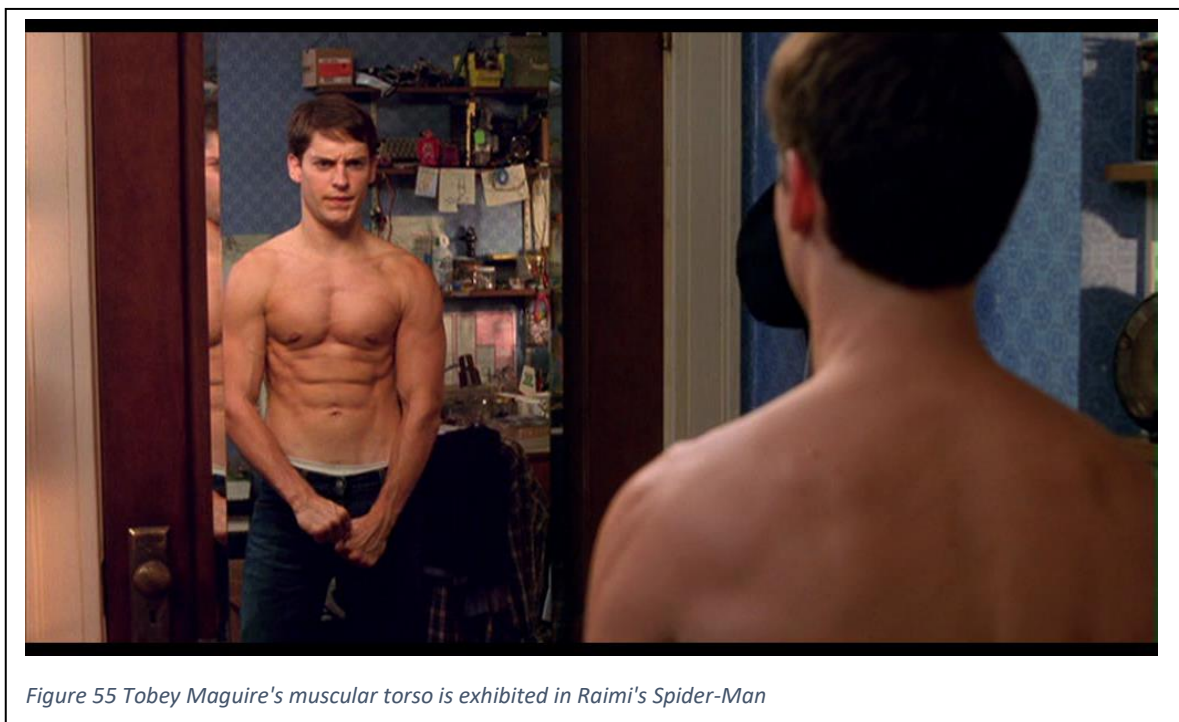
<sup>447</sup> Ibid., pp. 62-63.

<sup>448</sup> Aaron Taylor, 'Playing Peter Parker: Spider-Man and Superhero Film Performance', in Matt Yockey (ed.), *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, Forthcoming).

<sup>449</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, pp. 97-101.



Bale's training is communicated by paratextual discourse, rather than seeking examples from the text itself.<sup>450</sup> The most prominent demonstration of the actor's physical labour in Raimi's *Spider-Man* occurs when Peter wakes up transformed after being bitten by the radioactive spider, and wonders at his newly toned physique in the mirror [Figure 55].<sup>451</sup> This moment invites the viewer to appreciate not just Peter's metamorphosis, but the work that Maguire has put in to sculpt his body. Following this scene, whenever Maguire wears the Spider-Man costume his physical presence is foregrounded by the skintight fabric hugging the contours of his musculature.



The transformation of Peter's body also acts as a metaphor for the changes an adolescent goes through with puberty. It is important to note that his body is still one of a young adult. He is lithe and acrobatic;

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<sup>450</sup> One instance in which Bale's efforts are exhibited textually occurs in *Batman Begins* when Bruce is training with the League of Shadows and fends off attacks from the group's members while wearing only a pair of trousers, thus displaying his muscular torso.

<sup>451</sup> Prior to Peter sleeping he looks in the mirror, revealing Maguire's head mapped onto skinny body. The strangeness of seeing a Hollywood star's head on such a meagre physique indicates that this is not Maguire's body. However, if audiences are unsure, paratextual materials make it clear. On the 'Special Effects Crew' DVD commentary, visual effects designer John Dykstra emphasises "this is not Tobey Maguire's body". Conversely, when the muscular physique is exhibited, visual effects supervisor Scott Stokduk ensures that it is not misconstrued as a digital construct by asserting "that's Tobey's real body". John Dykstra and Scott Stokduk, audio commentary on *Spider-Man* (2002) (DVD, Columbia TriStar, UK, 2002) ASIN: B00005RDQI.

a boyish athlete rather than a burly weightlifter, as conveyed by the fluidity of his digital body's movements. This distinction is outlined in his wrestling match against Bone Saw McGraw (Randy Savage), whose bulging muscles are undermined by Spider-Man's gymnastics. Peter/Spider-Man's physique provides a counterpoint to other cinematic superheroes, one of the most prominent at the time of the films' releases, Wolverine (Hugh Jackman), possessing a brawnier build, complete with chest hair that Peter lacks. It also distinguishes him from Reeve's Superman, whose movements have a gentleness that bind him to Clark, while Spider-Man's gymnastic body conveys the vigour of youth. The physical spectacle of a live-action superhero's profilmic body can therefore take different forms that are linked to their characterisation.

Spider-Man's digital body does the acrobatic heroics while Maguire's body emotes and asserts physical labor.<sup>452</sup> This dichotomy conveys the segregation of superhero and civilian identities that Peter/Spider-Man endeavours to uphold. The face-covering mask is of particular significance in this regard; by concealing his boyish features, Peter seeks to present as an adult (a *Spider-Man*) and escape his marginalisation as a youth. However, as demonstrated in my analysis of *Amazing Fantasy* #15, a popular concern of *Spider-Man* texts is the impossibility of separating the Peter and Spider-Man identities. While Peter/Spider-Man tries to construct a binary, the identities inevitably flow into each other on a spectrum.

In comic books, juxtapositions of different forms and styles can evoke interactions between the identities. In the Raimi *Spider-Man* trilogy, the intermingling of Spider-Man's digital body and Peter/Maguire's physical presence provides a comparable means of presenting the inescapable interlacing of identities. The uncanniness of Spider-Man's flawlessly agile digital body provides a potent representation of the infallible hero that Peter sees as an escape from his daily troubles. Scenes when Maguire's unmasked face is composited onto Spider-Man's digital body reveal that the superhero does

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<sup>452</sup> A stunt double's body is also used in certain scenes. However, the films endeavour to hide this body's existence, whereas the digital body and Maguire's body declare their presence.

not escape, but rather is infused with and driven by, Peter's humanity. This technique peaks in *Spider-Man 3* when a lengthy airborne battle is staged between two unmasked opponents: Peter in civilian clothes and Harry Osborn (James Franco) as Green Goblin. Both combatants' bodies oscillate between digital, profilmic and digital/profilmic hybrid forms throughout the fight. Maguire's expressions amplify the intensity of specific moments. For example, after the disclosure of his adversary's identity, Peter's digital body clings to a chunk of wall that tumbles through the air while the camera moves inward to reveal a blend of bewilderment and terror across Maguire's face as Peter's world both figuratively and literally crumbles. Peter's and Harry's emotions resonate outside of the immediate moment, providing a culmination of all the feelings they have exchanged over the preceding films. Having both characters unmasked situates this battle as an emotional (and technological) climax of the trilogy. Furthermore, rendering Peter's civilian body through the CGI usually reserved for his idealised superhero-self underscores how, just as Peter's problems torment Spider-Man, Spider-Man's actions impact Peter's life.

In *Spider-Man* texts, Spider-Man's inflection with Peter's desires and pain is frequently conveyed through deployment of the identities' conflicting voices. Silver-Age Spider-Man comic books often feature a disjunction between speech and thought balloons. For example, in a panel from *Amazing Spider-Man* #10, while Spider-Man boastfully mocks villain team the Enforcers his thought balloon reveals that his adversaries are actually overwhelming him,



Figure 56 Spider-Man's speech and thought balloons juxtapose confidence and anxiety in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #10.

exposing to the reader weakness that the superhero's dialogue attempts to conceal [Figure 56]. The simultaneous existence of speech and thought balloons within the panel represents the coexistent discrepant identities of Peter and Spider-Man. This coexistence does not engender equal balance. The

thought balloon contains double the amount of words than the speech balloon, causing it to break the panel border, and also includes bold, italicised words. These factors ensure that spatially and iconically the thought balloon holds greater prominence on the page, suggesting that Peter/Spider-Man's anxiety outweighs, and threatens to undermine, his confidence.

Although in screen incarnations of *Spider-Man* a shift in intonation is not as central to the transformation as in key *Superman* texts, it does often occur.<sup>453</sup> This is particularly prominent in the 1967 animated series, in which Spider-Man's voice is far deeper and more dramatic than Peter's.<sup>454</sup> This more typically masculine voice facilitates Spider-Man's presentation as an adult. In Raimi's *Spider-Man* films, Maguire's varying intonation is a key way that the protagonist is imbued with humanity. A clear example of the vocal distinction between identities occurs when the superhero saves Mary Jane at the World Unity Festival. As he drops her off outside St. Patrick's Cathedral he jokes in Spider-Man's bouncy manner before she asks his identity and he utters, in Peter's nervy and sincere tone, "you know who I am". He then shifts back to Spider-Man's joviality and utters the worded identifier "your friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man" before completing the transition to superhero-self upon swinging away in digital form. Having Maguire's soft, pensive tone for Peter emit from Spider-Man's expressionless mask reveals the human who has hidden his love for years. Becoming Spider-Man does not disavow these feelings, but provides another, unsuccessful, way to hide them. Shifts in intonation while wearing the Spider-Man costume thus function comparably to coexistent speech and thought balloons in *Spider-Man* comics to articulate the feelings that the superhero struggles to keep contained behind his mask.

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<sup>453</sup> Interestingly, while the *Electric Company* segments only feature Spider-Man, and not Peter, Spider-Man's voice is distinguished from other characters through speaking in written words that emit from his mouth in speech balloons. This remediation of comics 'encouraged young people to read and conceptualize the action'. Weiner and Peaslee, 'Introduction', *Web-Spinning Heroics*, p. 9. It is noteworthy that Weiner and Peaslee's choice of words reiterates the notion that written words are conceptual.

<sup>454</sup> There is even a scene in 'Sub-Zero for Spidey' in which, as with Bud Collyer's Clark/Superman transformation, Peter's voice changes as he transforms into Spider-Man. Significantly, the voice suddenly deepens as he puts on the mask.

Throughout Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy, the superpowered body is a constant site of tension between the physical and the digital. This tension expresses an array of fraught relationships, both between different characters and the doubled identities of individual characters. Another relationship through which identities are typically negotiated in superhero narratives is that of the superhero and the urban space they inhabit. New York is another feature of Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy that is realised through a range of strategies, with its external spaces often being digitally augmented while key internal spaces are constructed from physical mise-en-scène that recalls the past.

### The Politics of Space

The bond between Spider-Man and New York is embedded in the fact that, while Superman travels from Krypton to Smallville before settling in Metropolis, the most common narrative framework for *Spider-Man* is to have Peter growing up in Queens before moving to Manhattan. This localised focus, related also to Spider-Man's more modest power-set, is a retreat from the emphasis *Superman: The Movie* places on exhibiting cinema's potential to offer expansive universes. However, Raimi's *Spider-Man* films resonate outside of local confines. By being set exclusively in New York, the trilogy explores an environment that can be presented as a synecdoche of corporate and commercial U.S. culture. The particular ways that different spaces are constructed and inhabited in Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy communicate the films' sociopolitical views.

### *External Space and Community*

Despite typically being presented as near-synonymous with New York, Peter/Spider-Man belongs to a select group of New York's, and more broadly the U.S.'s, inhabitants. The lack of diversity in superhero texts is a frequent focus of critiques of the genre. Hassler-Forest explains that the figure of the superhero in general 'remains grounded in forms of white heterosexual masculinity'.<sup>455</sup> This tendency

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<sup>455</sup> Dan Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes*, p. 196. It should be noted that there have been superhero films with non-white leads, although these are rarely blockbusters. Examples of low- and mid-budget features include *The Meteor Man* (Robert Townsend, 1993), *Blankman* (1994), *Steel* (Kenneth Johnson, 1997), *Spawn* (Mark A.Z. Dippé, 1997) and *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998). At the time of writing, *Hancock* (Peter Berg, 2008) is the most commercially successful superhero blockbuster to feature a non-white lead, finding far greater profits than notable contemporaries, namely the *Blade* sequels (Guillermo del Toro, 2002 and David S. Goyer, 2004) and *Catwoman* (Pitof, 2004). *Hancock* (budget \$150 mil) grossed \$227,946,274 domestic, \$624,386,746 worldwide, compared to *Blade II's* (budget 54 mil) \$82,348,319 and \$155,010,032, *Blade: Trinity's* (budget \$65 mil)

of the superhero genre threatens to inhibit an inclusive exploration of U.S. identity. Examining ways that Raimi's *Spider-Man* films present and populate New York's external spaces allows the films' multicultural makeup to be evaluated in relation to other *Spider-Man* texts, and can illuminate views that the films express about the city's citizenry.

Although the *Spider-Man* matrix is dominated by texts centred on problems faced by white characters, non-white characters have featured throughout the character's history. Wright argues that in the 1960s Marvel were subtly subversive, managing 'to strike an anti-establishment pose without appearing political. For instance, Marvel's comic books at this time rarely mention the civil rights movement, yet Marvel was the first publisher to integrate African Americans into comic books'.<sup>456</sup> This integration is most explicit in the introduction of black superhero Black Panther. Wright identifies *Spider-Man* comic books as the first to feature 'random black bystanders, college students, and policemen', and outlines that 'the first major African American supporting character in Marvel Comics was the Daily Bugle's city editor Joe Robertson', who debuted in 1967's *The Amazing Spider-Man* #51.<sup>457</sup> A heightened desire to explore the relation of non-white people to the American establishment is evident in the 1977 live-action series. Although Joseph "Robbie" Robertson only features in the pilot, Jonah's secretary, Rita Conway (Chip Fields), is African-American. Rita's interactions with other characters go further than just promoting a racially inclusive society. At points she draws attention to her ethnicity and reflects on her status in the U.S.. For instance, in 'Escort to Danger' she tells Peter that she is able to speak unreservedly to Jonah due to the fact that "there are certain advantages to being a member of a disadvantaged minority".<sup>458</sup> This statement credits the patriarchal establishment with guilt for its subjugation of non-white people.

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\$52,411,906 and \$128,905,366, and *Catwoman's* (budget \$100 mil) \$40,202,379 and \$82,102,379. Figures from *Box Office Mojo*.

<sup>456</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, p. 219.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312; Stan Lee (w), John Romita Sr. (p) and Mike Esposito (i), 'In the Clutches of the Kingpin!', *The Amazing Spider-Man* #51 (New York: Marvel Comics, August 1967).

<sup>458</sup> For another example of a screen incarnation confronting issues of race, see Carter's discussion of an episode of the 1994 animated series titled 'The Rocket Racer'. Carter, 'Reinterpreting Myths', p. 216.

Straczynski's run places particular emphasis on New York's multicultural citizenry in an issue that directly depicts the aftermath of 9/11. *Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2 #36* features Spider-Man and other Marvel heroes helping with the clean-up, and celebrates the citizens of New York's communal search for survivors in images that integrate people of all creeds and colours.<sup>459</sup> The final page portrays an ensemble of American heroes arranged hierarchically. New York's emergency services are first and foremost, backed up by servicemen, then citizens such as nurses and construction workers, and Marvel's heroes at the back, all standing in front of the U.S. flag [Figure 57]. The multicultural makeup of this group promotes the idea that people of all races make up the U.S., while countering reactionary vilifications of the Other.<sup>460</sup> Foregrounding ordinary people over superheroes and the superpower that is America itself suggests that whatever response is made needs to be taken in the interest of the wider community. However, the superhero genre's regressive tendencies are still to some extent exposed by this promotion of diversity. In the image, women are very much of a minority, and while a significant amount of the non-fictional heroes are non-white, out of the eleven Marvel superheroes only Storm, one of the two female superheroes, is black.<sup>461</sup>

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<sup>459</sup> J. Michael Straczynski (w), John Romita Jr. (p), Scott Hanna (i), et al., 'Stand Tall', *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2 #36* (New York: Marvel Comics, December 2001).

<sup>460</sup> Spider-Man also explicitly expresses the need to challenge reactionary vilifications of the Other when he ponders "what do we tell the children? Do we tell them evil is a foreign face? No. Evil is the thought behind the face, and it can look just like yours".

<sup>461</sup> The Marvel characters in this image, besides Spider-Man, are from Marvel's three most prominent teams – Avengers, the Fantastic Four and the X-Men – all of whom are based in New York. Selecting through the criteria of locale, black characters such as Luke Cage/Power Man, a native of Harlem, and T'Challa/Black Panther, who is sometimes a member of the Avengers, would also have been available for selection. It seems a factor in them being omitted is their lack of cultural prominence, which is a reflection of the marginalisation of non-white heroes in the Marvel universe. However, it should be acknowledged that both have gained greater cultural prominence since 2001. Luke Cage (Mike Colter) is the protagonist of television series *Luke Cage* (Netflix, 2016- ), and T'Challa/Black Panther was introduced to the MCU in *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2016).



Figure 57 The final page of The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2 #36



After the promotion of unity in *Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2* #36, which pointedly presents ideas that counter racist voices, but similarly to 1960s *Spider-Man* comics integrates non-white characters into crowds, many subsequent stories in Straczynski's run explore the experiences of non-white characters. For example, in *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2* #37, Peter finds out that one of his students, a Hispanic girl called Jennifer, lives with other homeless children in an abandoned basement, and helps her track down her brother, who has taken a drug overdose.<sup>462</sup> Elsewhere, in *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2* #55 and #56, Peter/Spider-Man is forced to question the sociopolitical system he upholds when he helps a black girl, Melissa, find her brother, whom Spider-Man put in jail but has recently been released.<sup>463</sup> In each of these stories Peter works to resolve individuals' problems, rather than reporting their transgressions to the authorities. While he does not take action to change the system under which these problems exist, the stories suggest that the ideal of a unified society in contemporary New York is problematised by social structures that perpetuate inequality.

Despite being contemporaneous to Straczynski's run, Raimi's *Spider-Man* films exhibit multiculturalism to a similar degree as 1960s *Spider-Man* comic books, integrating non-white characters into the general populace. The only non-white character present throughout the trilogy is Robbie (Bill Nunn). All the central protagonists and villains are white. However, the ways that Spider-Man and other characters inhabit external space in the films evoke more inclusive expressions of New York's community.

The films' spectacular realisation of Spider-Man's movements articulates views on the freedoms New York's external spaces can offer its citizens. Martin Flanagan argues that the opportunities Spider-Man's New York offers for physical mobility are linked to social mobility and proposes that this is evident in the superhero's movements: 'the moral function of the superhero is also connected to

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<sup>462</sup> J. Michael Straczynski (w), John Romita Jr. (p), Scott Hanna (i) et al., 'Interlude', *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2* #37 (New York: Marvel Comics, January 2002). Peter/Spider-Man helps Jenny again, investigating the abduction of other homeless children, in J. Michael Straczynski (w), John Romita Jr. (p), Scott Hanna (i) et al., *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2* #40-42 (New York: Marvel Comics, June 2002-August 2002).

<sup>463</sup> Fiona Avery (w), J. Michael Straczynski (w), John Romita Jr. (p), et al., *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2* #55-46 (New York: Marvel Comics, September 2003-October 2003)

mobility and freedom: to enforce a fair and equal distribution of space – essentially “reclaiming” the streets from crime in the interests of ordinary citizens, while rescinding the right to move of villains’.<sup>464</sup> The uninhibited dynamism of Spider-Man’s movements express this egalitarian mobility. Furthermore, Spider-Man does not just exhibit Bukatman’s conceptualisation of utopia as movement, as discussed in the previous chapter, but manifests and sustains utopia through his actions. In one sense, the space above the city streets, in-between skyscrapers and on rooftops, that Spider-Man navigates is one private to the superhero, in which he can escape traffic congestion and enjoy unrestricted movement. In another sense, Spider-Man’s fluid swinging around skyscrapers and battles against supervillains reclaims these spaces from those who endanger them, recouping these buildings as symbols of modernity’s aspirations, rather than ones of terror.

While Spider-Man’s movements symbolically express and narratively pursue an ideal of a democratised New York, the city itself plays a key role in evoking and enabling this utopia. Like Peter’s body, the city is a site of transformation. As the trilogy progresses, a digitally manipulated New York takes on an increasing degree of elasticity to complement Spider-Man’s fluid movements. In the first film, space gains its highest degree of malleability within the diegesis when Green Goblin attacks the World Unity Festival. Digitally rendered segments of buildings fall toward the streets, presenting a direct threat to civilians’ profilmic bodies. Space takes on greater elasticity in Raimi’s *Spider-Man 2*. When Otto Octavius’ fusion machine is activated, metal is drawn toward it, causing structures to contort. The first time this happens, window panes bend inward until the glass shatters, digitally rendered shards propelled toward and killing Rosalie Octavius. In this case, as in the first film, digital environmental elements act antagonistically. The second film also features some instances of characters using dynamic environments to their advantage. For example, while fighting up the side of a clock tower, Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus both use a clock hand as a projectile. Spider-Man’s digital body makes much more productive use of transformative space in Raimi’s *Spider-Man 3*. When

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<sup>464</sup> Martin Flanagan, “‘Continually in the Making’: Spider-Man’s New York”, in Peaslee and Weiner (ed.), *Web-Spinning Heroics*, p. 45.

Spider-Man saves Gwen Stacy (Bryce Dallas Howard) as she falls down the side of a skyscraper, he weaves through tumbling, digitally rendered rubble that turns from obstacle to aid as he catapults and springs off pieces to gain speed. Elsewhere, while chasing Sandman, Spider-Man surfs on a digitally rendered door that has been removed from an armoured van [Figure 58]. He attaches to the van and passing cars with strings of webbing to gain velocity from being towed. In both scenes, CGI transforms the city as crumbling walls and detached doors become mobile platforms.



Figure 58 Spider-Man surfs on a digitally rendered van door in Raimi's *Spider-Man 3*

The shared dynamism of superhero and city reconfigures the relationship between digital body and environment, which Purse outlines as one of the key criteria influencing the reception of digital bodies, as discussed earlier. Purse proposes that photorealism is not a fixed quality, but can be seen as 'a continuum between looser and more strident performances of photographicness'.<sup>465</sup> The negative reception of Spider-Man's digital body stemmed from its 'cartooniness' occupying the opposite side of the continuum than its urban surroundings.<sup>466</sup> However, as demonstrated above, with each new film in the trilogy space becomes more dynamic as it interacts in increasingly complex ways with Spider-Man's body, drawing the superhero and his surroundings into alignment on the photorealistic continuum. While striving to make the films more perceptually consistent, this strategy has narrative

<sup>465</sup> Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema*, p. 60.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

and thematic resonance. Spider-Man's increasingly positive harnessing of city space narrates the consolidation of his bond with New York as he masters his powers.<sup>467</sup> Meanwhile, by fostering spatiotemporal unity, tactile interactions between Spider-Man's body and environmental elements augment the films' representation of social unity. Spider-Man and New York's complementary elastic forms present a city free from restraints that works with its inhabitants to counteract threats to the utopian ideal.

Harmonious relations between superhero and city have been conveyed by imbuing New York with plasticity since Spider-Man's first comic book adventures. Bukatman observes that in Ditko's compositions 'the physical space of the actual city became utterly unstable. Walls became floors and verticality was close to being entirely lost in his swirling circular forms'.<sup>468</sup> For example, the angle from which the action is presented shifts so that walls run at conflicting angles to vertical panel borders. This strategy is evident in a strip in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #3 [Figure 59], in which the first panel positions the wall Spider-Man is climbing diagonally to the panel borders.<sup>469</sup> The proceeding panel radically alters the angle to peer down at Spider-Man, offering a vertiginous perspective as the wall recedes to the centre of the panel. Framing the wall that Spider-Man crawls along parallel with the horizontal panel border gives it the properties of a floor.

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<sup>467</sup> This diegetic narrative is again interlinked with the complementary extra-textual narrative about the special effects advancing from film to film.

<sup>468</sup> Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, p. 207.

<sup>469</sup> Stan Lee (w), Steve Ditko (a), 'Spider-Man Versus Doctor Octopus', *The Amazing Spider-Man* #3 (1963) (repr. in Budiansky (ed.) *Marvel Masterworks Volume 1*, pp. 67-88.



Figure 59 A wall's verticality is destabilised when it is presented from different angles in *The Amazing Spider-Man #3*

Screen adaptations possess other means to subvert the city's geometry. The 1977 live-action series recreates the composition of the second panel in the above strip in a key shot that features in multiple episodes [Figure 60]. The metamorphosis into a live-action moving image compounds the subversion of space by having cars and buses on the streets below



Figure 60 A wall becomes a floor in the 1977 live-action *Spider-Man* television series

drive along the top of the frame. If the wall Spider-Man climbs up has properties of a floor, then these cars effectively float above the floor's surface. Presenting movements along multiple axes as the superhero progresses toward the fourth wall recalls the kaleidoscopic flying sequences in *Superman: The Movie*.

Movements of bodies, objects and the camera in screen incarnations of superheroes provide a quite literal means for presenting the city as a space that facilitates mobility. New directional freedoms that digital filmmaking technologies enable in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films' cinematography augment the city's quality of pliability. The sequence in Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* in which Spider-Man fights Doctor Octopus

up a clock tower and on a speeding train exemplifies ways that the films use a free-roaming virtual camera in digitally composited spaces to present the city as a dynamic space. After an initial tussle Spider-Man's digital body falls down the clock tower, this fall presented in various shots in which the wall runs along the vertical or horizontal edges of the frame. Once Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus tumble onto the train the vertical setting is switched for a horizontal one, yet geometric properties remain unstable. As Spider-Man clings to the end of a carriage he is shown head-on, climbing toward the viewer in a shot that recalls those in which walls run along the bottom of the frame [Figure 61]. Rushing wind caused by the train's velocity likens moving along its rooftop to climbing up a building. When the fight shifts to the side of the train, the camera first frames the combatants from above in a composition that would usually be equated with a birds-eye-view but in this case is shot side-on with the train, the fact that the camera is upside-down providing a further directional skew [Figure 62]. The topsy-turvyness of this shot is made explicit as the camera twists away, ending up peering down on the train from a high angle [Figure 63]. Throughout this fight, surfaces oscillate between functioning as walls and floors, at times within single shots, presenting verticality and horizontality as malleable variants rather than oppositions.



*Figure 61 Spider-Man clings to a train carriage, framed as if he were climbing a wall, in Raimi's Spider-Man 2*



*Figure 62 An upside-down shot shows Doctor Octopus and Spider-Man fighting on the side of a train in Raimi's Spider-Man 2*



*Figure 63 Continuation of take from previous figure. The camera has now twisted away to show a high angle shot of the train.*

Mobility in this sequence is also evident in the amount and kind of space covered. While the main set pieces in the first *Spider-Man* film are centred on specific landmarks, such as Times Square and the Roosevelt Bridge, the train-top bout exemplifies the sequels' tendency to stage battles that move through the streets of Manhattan. Other examples include Spider-Man's first fight with Sandman and Peter's aerial battle against Harry/Green Goblin. In these scenes landmarks are often visible in the background, but their lack of centrality suggests that New York is comprised of more than just individual iconic buildings that can be destroyed by terrorists or owned by corporations. Having the fights weave and progress through New York's streets and public transport expresses the sense that

Spider-Man's actions protect spaces that belong to all of New York's citizenry, and seek to retain freedom of movement for this community.

New York's citizens are not just an abstract presence evoked by kinesis and staging. Spider-Man's encounters with a diverse citizenry as he traverses New York affirm that he is fighting for and *with* a multicultural community. During the train-top battle Doctor Octopus sabotages the brakes. After Spider-Man saves the train, the passengers reciprocate by carrying his unconscious body to safety. Men and women of different ethnicities – including blacks, whites, Asians and Hispanics – and socioeconomic backgrounds, from businessmen to blue collar workers, are present. When Doctor Octopus returns, this community stand together defiantly to block the supervillain's path to Spider-Man [Figure 64]. This promotion of multiculturalism through casting a diverse community as an active ally to Spider-Man amplifies the film's contemporary resonance, Jeanne Holland asserting that 'this scene enacts the post-9/11 theme of "United We Stand"'.<sup>470</sup> A comparable moment occurs in the first film. Citizens of various races are galvanised to counter forces that threaten Spider-Man/New York when they stand together on Roosevelt Bridge and hurl objects at Green Goblin to knock his attacks on Spider-Man off course. Spider-Man's bond with this community is explicated when a black extra shouts to Green Goblin "you mess with Spidey you mess with New York", to which a white extra reiterates "you mess with one of us you mess with all of us". These scenes attest to Flanagan's assertion that 'mostly, Raimi delivers a socially healthy, multicultural city, populated by individuals that, with a gesture towards a post-9/11 unified citizenry, are as heroic in their own way as Spider-Man, and who more than once unite to come to his aid'.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Jeanne Holland, 'It's Complicated: *Spider-Man 2*'s Reinscription of "Good" and "Evil" in Post-9/11 America', *The Journal of American Culture*, 35:4 (December 2012), p. 299.

<sup>471</sup> Flanagan, "'Continually in the Making'", p. 47.





Figure 64 People from a range of ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds unite to block Doctor Octopus' path to Spider-Man in Raimi's *Spider-Man 2*

Burke argues that this celebration of community aligns with post-9/11 sentiment at the expense of contradicting traditional elements of *Spider-Man* texts, namely the hero's individualism and the populace's distrust for him.<sup>472</sup> However, what actually occurs is a transformation of familiar traits of the *Spider-Man* matrix through placing them in dialogue with the contemporary sociopolitical climate. In *Spider-Man* texts it is most pervasively the adult establishment that denigrates Spider-Man, while other social groups, particularly Peter's peers, provide a supportive presence that boosts Spider-Man's confidence. Raimi's *Spider-Man* films develop this trait by aligning Spider-Man with the wider community in external public spaces, rather than situating him alongside the establishment guardians of more exclusive internal spaces. Spider-Man's bond with the city's citizenry in these external spaces also extends the symbiotic relation Spider-Man has with New York to include the multicultural community as a key component of the Spider-Man/New York amalgam. It is through the combined efforts of community, Spider-Man and city as a complete entity that New York's external public spaces are maintained as safe environments in which people can move freely. Thus, inherent in the films' conceptualisation of urban utopia is a harmonious multicultural community.

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<sup>472</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, p. 34.

### *Nostalgic Construction of Internal Space*

Despite Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy's expressions of a multicultural utopia in external spaces, internal spaces are governed by different forms of white patriarchy. The focus on figures like Uncle Ben, Norman Osborn and J. Jonah Jameson can be attributed to the films bringing Silver Age *Spider-Man* comic books back to the centre of the *Spider-Man* matrix, rather than adapting characters introduced in more recent or contemporaneous incarnations. The cultural makeup of the films' protagonists accordingly echoes these comics which, although relatively racially aware for 1960's popular culture, are lacking in comparison to certain subsequent *Spider-Man* texts. The tendency of superhero blockbusters to harken back to Golden and Silver Age comic books, as also observed in my analysis of *Superman: The Movie*, potentially contributes to a delay in subversive ideas moving from superhero comic books to their film adaptations.<sup>473</sup> The nostalgic inclinations of Raimi's *Spider-Man* films are particularly evident in the design of key internal spaces. To assess whether the nostalgic presentation of these spaces functions in ways that are not simply regressive, it is necessary to identify some instructive conceptualisations of nostalgia.

Svetlana Boym traces the history of nostalgia, outlining its etymological roots in two Greek words: '*nostos* meaning "return home" and *algia* "longing"'.<sup>474</sup> Johannes Hofer created the word in 1688 to describe a medical condition suffered by people longing for a home from which they were displaced.<sup>475</sup> Notions of what nostalgia entails developed from a longing for a place to a longing for a time. As such, as outlined by Linda Hutcheon, 'nostalgia became less a physical than a psychological condition... it

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<sup>473</sup> It should be emphasised that while Straczynski's run often explores the problems of marginalised non-white individuals, many other contemporaneous superhero comic books do not. For instance, *Ultimate Spider-Man* thematises economic, but not racial, inequality, and integrates non-white characters into the background. However, the proposition that superhero blockbusters are largely behind superhero comic books with regard to diverse representation is further evidenced by the fact that, in the 2010s, superhero comics books are experiencing what is generally perceived within the industry and by its commentators as a trend toward diversification. For instance, in 2014 a woman and African American took the mantels of Thor and Captain America, respectively, and Marvel introduced Muslim youth Kamala Khan as their new Ms. Marvel. A key point at the outset of this trend is the replacement of Peter Parker by black Hispanic youth Miles Morales as the Ultimate universe's Spider-Man. Despite this increased diversity in Marvel comic books, the first films produced by Marvel studios to feature a non-white and female lead are not due to be released until *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler) in 2018 and *Captain Marvel* (no director at time of writing) in 2019, respectively.

<sup>474</sup> Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia and its Discontents', *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2007, p. 7.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

also went from being a *curable* medical illness to an *incurable* (indeed unassuageable) condition of the spirit or psyche.<sup>476</sup> Once nostalgia became about time rather than space the longed for object was made irretrievable since, while one can return to a place, one cannot go back in time. Theorisations of nostalgia often explore how this unfulfillable desire to return to the past impacts the present.

The suggestion made in my previous chapter that *Superman: The Movie's* nostalgic stylisation facilitates an evasion of contemporary concerns, and thus de-politicises the film, aligns with Frederic Jameson's influential conceptualisation of the nostalgia film. Superhero blockbusters are often discussed as examples of Jameson's nostalgia film. For example, Hassler-Forest applies the concept to *Superman: The Movie*, while Wilson Koh applies it Raimi's *Spider-Man*.<sup>477</sup> In Jameson's postmodern theory, 'the formal apparatus of nostalgia films has trained us to consume the past in the form of glossy images'.<sup>478</sup> These glossy images replace the actual past, causing a loss of history that makes us unable to situate ourselves on a timeline. What remains is a perpetual present that cannot be located in relation to the past. Jameson thus brands nostalgic stylisation in films 'an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history... we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach'.<sup>479</sup> Jameson does consider the potential for stereotyped images of the past to have a productive function in his discussion of 'post-nostalgia' films.<sup>480</sup> These films exhibit nostalgic stylisation but enact an allegorical search for the present through placing different eras beside, and in tension with, one another. However, Jameson concludes that 'they show a collective unconscious in the process of trying to identify its own present at the same time that they

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<sup>476</sup> Linda Hutcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern', *University of Toronto English Library*, (1998), <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>>, accessed on 07 January 2015. Emphasis in original.

<sup>477</sup> Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes*, p. 48; Wilson Koh, 'Everything Old is Good Again: Myth and Nostalgia in Spider-Man', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 23:5 (2009), pp. 736-738.

<sup>478</sup> Frederic Jameson, 'The Nostalgia Mode and Nostalgia for the Present' in Peter Brooker and Will Brooker (ed.) *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video* (London: Arnold, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-34. Jameson discusses *Something Wild* (Jonathan Demme, 1986) and *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) as examples of the 'post-nostalgia' film.

illuminate the failure of this attempt, which seems to reduce itself to the recombination of various stereotypes of the past'.<sup>481</sup> Catherine Constable argues that 'thus the sole distinction between the post-nostalgia film and the nostalgia film is that the former overtly fail to delineate the present, while the latter unwittingly obliterate it'.<sup>482</sup> Even when the post-nostalgia film attempts to locate the present it is doomed to failure due to pursuing this through the same stereotypes of the past found in the nostalgia film.

Other conceptualisations of nostalgia see the potential for a more successful negotiation of past and present. Boym recognises that nostalgia can offer a conservative retreat into the past, but also proposes an alternative function, arguing that 'nostalgia, in my view, is not always retrospective; it can be prospective as well. The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future'.<sup>483</sup> Boym's designation of two different types of nostalgia, restorative and reflective, explicates this notion of nostalgia being able to productively shape the future by negotiating past and present. Boym defines restorative and reflective nostalgia as follows, noting that they are not binaries, but can be balanced differently against each other:

Restorative nostalgia stresses nostos (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives on algia (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately... Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt.<sup>484</sup>

Restorative nostalgia mythologises the past while reflective nostalgia acknowledges the imagined nature of myths and questions their foundations. In this sense, reflective nostalgia interrogates the conservative regression that Jameson identifies in all nostalgia. By juxtaposing different time periods, Boym's reflective model aligns with Jameson's discussion of the post-nostalgia film, but she explores

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<sup>481</sup> Jameson, 'The Nostalgia Mode and Nostalgia for the Present', p. 34.

<sup>482</sup> Catherine Constable, *Postmodernism and Film: Rethinking Hollywood's Aesthetics* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2015), p. 66.

<sup>483</sup> Boym, 'Nostalgia and its Discontents', p. 8.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

ways that these periods are represented spatially, arguing that reflective nostalgia 'cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space'.<sup>485</sup> While nostalgia developed from a longing for a place to a longing for a time, reflective nostalgia acknowledges the role space can play in the representation of time. Following Boym, co-existing spatial representations of different eras can examine the present by situating it in relation to knowingly imagined visions of the past.

Linda Hutcheon provides a framework that illuminates contradictions in certain kinds of nostalgia. In outlining her conceptualisations of irony, nostalgia and the postmodern, Hutcheon aligns nostalgia with a desire to retreat into the past, but argues that when combined with irony it becomes reflective and critical about this retreat.<sup>486</sup> Hutcheon opposes Jameson's assimilation of nostalgia and the postmodern, arguing instead that nostalgia in the conservative sense is modernist, but when it gains a reflexive edge through being tinged with irony it becomes postmodern. This ironised nostalgia exhibits the equivocal qualities inherent to Hutcheon's conceptualisation of the postmodern, which always has 'some mix of the complicitous and the critical at its ambivalent core'.<sup>487</sup> The nature of this complicitous critique is elucidated by Hutcheon's discussion of postmodern film, which 'does not deny that it is implicated in capitalist modes of production, because it knows it cannot. Instead, it exploits its 'insider' position in order to begin a subversion from within'.<sup>488</sup> Postmodern texts cannot help but be complicit with the system in which they are produced, but can use their 'insider' status to undermine this system. Hutcheon's conceptualisation of the postmodern explicitly counters Jameson's. As Constable summarises, for Hutcheon the postmodern 'is not synonymous with the loss of meaning and value but rather provokes discussion and analysis of how cultural meanings and values are constructed and negotiated'.<sup>489</sup> Hutcheon's postmodern ironised nostalgia enacts this analysis of meaning through a critical negotiation of past and present. This negotiation has parallels with Boym's notion of reflective

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<sup>485</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>486</sup> Hutcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern'.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 114.

<sup>489</sup> Constable, *Postmodernism and Film*, p. 81-82.

nostalgia. However, while Boym acknowledges that elements of restorative and reflective nostalgia can be present simultaneously, Hutcheon's conceptualisation of the postmodern as intrinsically equivocal attributes complicitous qualities to all critical nostalgia. Ironised nostalgia contributes to cultural constructions of an idealised past while concurrently interrogating this process.

Raimi's *Spider-Man's* complicity in de-historicising and de-politicising culture is evident in an oft-recited anecdote in discussions of Hollywood and 9/11. An early trailer, in which Spider-Man uses a web spun between the Twin Towers to trap crooks in a helicopter, was pulled by distributor Sony following the attacks.<sup>490</sup> Koh argues that the nostalgic mise-en-scène of Raimi's *Spider-Man* similarly erases history by constructing an idealised past:

The set props in *Spider-Man* were chosen to make audiences experience an unreal, near non-specific era, one that spans half a century of real-world history, yet calculatedly compresses those decades to paradoxically co-exist with each other in every second of the film. In other words, the mode has more to do with current perceptions of a generalized past than with the authentic re-creation of a complex and specific reality. It simply reflects its producers' idealized interpretations of the past.<sup>491</sup>

Flanagan describes this intermingling of different eras and elements from New York's and Spider-Man's history as 'a typically postmodern *bricolage* strategy'.<sup>492</sup> However, while artefacts from different decades and contexts are overtly present in the film's mise-en-scène, individual spaces typically construct versions of relatively specific eras. The meanings that each of these spaces generate emerge through the ways that they are inhabited by characters and situated in relation to one another.

Ben (Cliff Robertson) and May Parker's (Rosemary Harris) house in Raimi's *Spider-Man* is the primary site of nostalgia for an idealised 1960s U.S., when comic books were enjoying their Silver Age. The house is situated in a humble but cosy and pristine working class suburbia in external shots.<sup>493</sup> Soft

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<sup>490</sup> For examples of this anecdote's telling see Tama Leaver, 'Artificial Mourning: The Spider-Man Trilogy and September 11th' in Peaslee and Weiner (ed.), *Web-Spinning Heroics* p. 155; Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes*, pp. 125-127; and McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film*, p. 2.

<sup>491</sup> Koh, 'Everything Old is Good Again', p. 737.

<sup>492</sup> Flanagan, "'Continually in the Making'", p. 47.

<sup>493</sup> Even the unkempt garden kept by the Watsons in the house next to the Parkers only has grass a mere few inches longer than the others on the street and the odd object strewn on the lawn.

oranges, beiges and floral patterns decorate the interior, while the most modern technology in the lounge is a wooden cased analogue television [Figure 65]. The first time we see the space, Ben is coded as working class by a literal blue collared shirt, worn casually with no tie under an unbuttoned waistcoat [Figure 66]. The affectionate portrayal of Ben and May is accentuated by their loving relationship. While adhering to a breadwinner/housewife binary, they are in harmony as they pass each other objects and traverse the house. Mise-en-scène roots this space in the 1950s/60s, while its homely presentation and Ben and May's archetypal matrimonial union cast it as a model working class utopia.



*Figure 65 The interior of Ben and May's house in Raimi's Spider-Man*



Figure 66 Ben in Raimi's *Spider-Man*

This idealised vision of the past does not simply offer what Koh sees as ‘an appealing better-than-real illusion to escape into’.<sup>494</sup> Boym argues that imagined pasts can avoid being regressive if they are recognised as imagined. Nostalgia can be for ‘the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that have become obsolete’; for something that is recognised as never having existed, but that should have existed.<sup>495</sup> The sense of Ben and May’s house representing an ideal that cannot be maintained is established in the first scene set in the space. Ben discusses being made redundant after 35 years and mourns how his lack of knowledge about computers makes him unqualified for most jobs in the current climate. The space is therefore not one of easy retreat from contemporary problems. Rather, contemporary developments are destabilising the space’s sanctity.<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> Koh, ‘Everything Old is Good Again’, p. 738.

<sup>495</sup> Boym, ‘Nostalgia and its Discontents’, p. 10.

<sup>496</sup> Maguire also carries connotations of an idealised past that cannot be sustained. Koh notes Maguire’s prominence in period films like *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998) and *Seabiscuit* (Gary Ross, 2003), but does not acknowledge that *Pleasantville* is explicitly about exploring the disjunction between reality and the idealised 1940s sitcom into which Maguire’s character is transported. Koh, ‘Everything Old is Good Again’, p. 735.



Capitalism is the force that threatens this working class utopia, with Ben's corporation laying off employees for greater profit margins. The nostalgic representation of Ben and May's working class values that gently vilifies corporate culture attests to Hutcheon's assertion that nostalgia

is transideological, despite the fact that many would argue that, whether used by the right or the left, nostalgia is fundamentally conservative in its praxis... the nostalgia for an idealized community in the past has been articulated by the ecology movement as often as by fascism.<sup>497</sup>

The utopian presentation of Ben and May's working class lifestyle promotes their pro-social values as those that Peter needs to carry forward, encapsulated by the fact that it is Ben who passes on the wisdom inspiring Peter to help others: "with great power comes great responsibility". This is a rearticulation of 'one of the most quoted lines in the history of sequential art'.<sup>498</sup> When first deployed in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, this worded identifier marks a solemn moment of personal reflection as Peter walks alone in the moonlight, like the lonesome but duty-bound Westerner.<sup>499</sup> In many subsequent *Spider-Man* texts the line is attributed to Ben. When Ben utters the worded identifier in Raimi's *Spider-Man* he pointedly recalls the Western archetype of the old timer whose age equates with wisdom. His gentle but assured tone gives the words a timeless quality. A slight smile cracks across his softly weathered face, in recognition of delivering a line that has resonated through popular culture for decades. The presence of Western tropes upon this line's first uses in comics and film signals that its promotion of moral obligation and personal sacrifice upholds a mythologised form of American heroism.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> Hutcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern'.

<sup>498</sup> Peaslee and Weiner, 'Introduction', p. 5.

<sup>499</sup> While the line is now widely attributed to Spider-Man, much of the wording, and ideas it conveys, can be traced back prior to Spider-Man's debut. For example, in one notable instance that demonstrates the words and ideas reverberating through superhero lore, Eben Kent (Edward Cassidy) says to Clark in chapter one ('Superman Comes to Earth') of the first *Superman* serial "because of these great powers, your speed and strength, your x-ray vision and super sensitive hearing, you have a great responsibility". The words and sentiment can be traced even further back, outside of the superhero genre, with Ben Saunders outlining how variations 'can be found in a range of more "respectable" sources, from the medieval-era writings of Christine de Pisan to the modern wartime speeches of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Stan Lee himself, however, cites the influence of the Bible—specifically Luke 12:48: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required."' Ben Saunders, *The Gods Wear Capes?: Spirituality, Fantasy and Superheroes* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 73.

<sup>500</sup> As discussed in my review of literature, Lawrence and Jewett discuss this archetypal narrative as the 'American monomyth'. Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*.

The value of holding the needs of others over your own, while simply attributed to Peter's thought process in *Amazing Fantasy #15*, is in the film aligned both with Ben and, through his nostalgic connotations, an idealised vision of the 1960s. The fact that the space that embodies this vision is always shown as impossible to retain, from its introduction when Ben's redundancy is announced to May being forced to sell the house in *Spider-Man 2*, makes it a site of reflective longing. Rather than offering a nostalgic retreat into an imagined past, the ideals this space embodies are acknowledged as unfulfilled, but presented as worth aspiring to. By assimilating Ben's words into his philosophy when he reiterates the worded identifier in his closing narration to Raimi's *Spider-Man*, Peter makes a commitment to pursue the values embodied by the film's knowingly idealised representation of the 60s.

It is important to acknowledge that the film exhibits complicity with ingrained social structures by aligning these values with white patriarch Ben. By presenting a parochial vision of working class 1960s suburbia as the idealised utopia to which we should aspire, the film ignores significant political movements of that era, such as the women's liberation and civil rights movements. The risk of Leftist nostalgic visions expressing conservative values is outlined by Hutcheon, who discusses how they often regress to times when rights were denied to, for instance, women, ethnic minorities and homosexuals.<sup>501</sup> This combination of subversion and regression demonstrates Hutcheon's argument that postmodern nostalgia offers a form of complicitous critique. In Raimi's *Spider-Man*, the relay between Ben, Peter/Spider-Man and New York provides the force that counterbalances the film's narrow vision of the past. Ben is a benevolent patriarch whose values, when enacted by Spider-Man in New York's external spaces, create a utopia that enables a multicultural populace freedom of movement.

Raimi's *Spider-Man's* capitalist patriarchs seek instead to maintain the establishment's exclusivity. The presentation of the spaces they inhabit build on the film's commentary on sociopolitical values. One

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<sup>501</sup> Hutcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern'.

of these spaces, the *Daily Bugle* offices, harkens back to the same era as Ben and May's house. Matthew McGowan and Jeremy Short observe that, in comic books, Peter 'began his freelance career during the newspaper's Golden Age in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when newsrooms were smoke-filled and frantic in advance of tomorrow's edition'.<sup>502</sup> Raimi's films recreate this popular image of a 'Golden Age' newspaper office. The *Bugle* office's walls and furnishings mostly offer an array of greys, greens and browns; a stereotypical vision of modernity's businesses. There are contemporary elements, such as computers, but editor Jonah's office lacks a computer, instead featuring a row of television monitors and a phone, facilitating his patriarchal role of observing and commanding [Figure 67]. The flow in and out of Jonah's office of people seeking orders further emphasise his commanding role, while creating the hustle and bustle associated with Golden Age newsrooms.



Figure 67 Jonah's office in Raimi's *Spider-Man*

The characterisation of Jonah communicates the film's perspective on this space. The film's Jonah recalls 1960s incarnations in both image and attitude. His square haircut with widow's peak, moustache and suit recreate a look established in Silver Age comic books [Figure 68 and Figure 69].

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<sup>502</sup> Matthew McGowan and Jeremy Short, 'Spider-Management: A Critical Examination of the Business World of Spider-Man', in Peaslee and Weiner (ed.), *Web Spinning Heroics*, p. 115.

Andrew A. Smith discusses Jonah's actions in 616 comic book continuity, demonstrating that, while for the most part villainous, at times Jonah has acted virtuously, for instance countering bigotry and exhibiting journalistic integrity.<sup>503</sup> The Jonah in Raimi's films lacks these redeeming features. He also lacks more outwardly dangerous ones that the character has often displayed, such as hiring, or funding the creation of, supervillains to defeat Spider-Man.<sup>504</sup> He aligns quite closely with the Jonah of the 1967 animated series: a constant source of antagonism to Peter/Spider-Man whose bluster is ultimately worse than his bite, generally ending each episode as a figure of comedic ridicule. Jonah bullies his employees to retain his position of superiority, restricts Peter's agency within the Daily Bugle office and denigrates Spider-Man with sensationalist stories, but is presented as a farcical figure.



Figure 68 Jonah in Raimi's Spider-Man

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<sup>503</sup> Andrew A. Smith, 'J. Jonah Jameson – Hero or Villain? Spider-Man's Nemesis Hard to Pigeonhole', in Peaslee and Weiner (ed.), *Web-Spinning Heroics*, pp. 101-112.

<sup>504</sup> For discussion of some of Jonah's more dangerous acts, see Smith, 'J. Jonah Jameson – Hero or Villain?', pp. 103-104.



Figure 69 Jonah in *The Amazing Spider-Man #1*

Drucker argues that Lee's writing of Jonah as a self-righteous, conservative figure whose well-intentioned but false claims prove inflammatory can be read as a critique of Frederic Wertham who, as discussed in my introduction, was a driving force behind the public outcry against comic books in the 1950s.<sup>505</sup> Drucker explains that this portrayal also functions more broadly as a comment on the establishment's attempts to dictate public thinking. Of course, an aspect of this establishment that Jonah specifically represents is the news media. Raimi's *Spider-Man's* caricatured presentation of Jonah as a bullish perpetuator of sensationalist falsehoods can be read as a general commentary on the need to interrogate the media's role in guiding public opinion, or linked to the contemporary sociopolitical climate. For example, Tama Leaver aligns Jonah's subversion of truth with the influence the news media had on the national response to 9/11, arguing that 'the power and influence of media is both highlighted and, to an extent, critiqued in the *Spider-Man* films'.<sup>506</sup> The farcical representation of Jonah parodies the reactionary response evident in the majority of press coverage of 9/11 and the

<sup>505</sup> Drucker, 'Spider-Man: MENACE!!! Stan Lee, Censorship and the 100-Issue Revolution', in Peaslee and Weiner (ed.), *Web-Spinning Heroics*, pp. 93-95.

<sup>506</sup> Leaver, 'Artificial Mourning', p. 158.

“War on Terror” which, as discussed by David L. Altheide, was ‘grounded in a discourse of fear’ that unquestioningly perpetuated the Bush administration’s master narrative.<sup>507</sup>

While the characterisation of Jonah as an obnoxious, cigar-chomping and penny-pinching mogul may seem to invite laughter over critical reflection, it portrays his mode of entrepreneurial capitalism as ridiculous and outdated. Rooting Jonah in past incarnations and historical stereotypes creates a nostalgic vision of a capitalism that had a clear face with obvious faults. This nostalgia is reflective in that it does not cherish the values Jonah embodies, but rather appreciates our ability to easily recognise their flaws. Reflection prompts audiences to impress this awareness of the potential for the press to obscure facts onto their understanding of contemporary media.

The characterisation of Robbie, the most prominent black character in the *Spider-Man* matrix, in the *Bugle* offices exemplifies the complicit nature of the film’s critique of patriarchal structures. Although presented as wise and fair, often voicing opposition to Jonah’s reactionary slander, Robbie barely has any influence over Jonah, and is relegated to a peripheral role with no real agency. When discussing the centrality of Oedipal narratives to superhero stories, Flanagan observes that in comic books Robbie provides a sympathetic father figure to Peter, but ‘Raimi’s films reduce Robertson’s role in order to leave a gap in Peter’s life whereby he can experience conflicting emotional ties with the older men

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<sup>507</sup> David L. Altheide, ‘Fear, Terrorism and Popular Culture’ in Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Randell (ed.), *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the “War on Terror”* (New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 11. Altheide notes examples of dissenting voices in the media throughout his essay, but outlines how these were generally found in more periphery channels, such as satirical comedy television shows, while the majority of the mainstream U.S. media perpetuated the Bush administration’s master narratives. For an exploration of reasons why the media acted in such a way, which discusses not just tabloid press but pays particular attention to influential and generally highly respected broadsheets like *The New York Times*, see David Dudge, *The War in Iraq and Why the Media Failed Us* (Westport: Praeger, 2006). Dudge summarises his key arguments, which emphasise that ways in which the Bush administration successfully took measures to control and contain the media: ‘the crucial pressures on the media were: First, the climate of patriotism after the September 11 attacks and before the Iraq war, which was subtly manipulated by the Bush administration to suppress dissent; second, the Bush administration’s own view of the media as little more than an information delivery system, rather than a constitutionally protected institution with a settled role to play within American society; third, the difficulty in reporting on intelligence issues when the media have no access to the original source; fourth, the heavy politicization of facts and the fracturing of bipartisanship in American politics; and, finally, media scandals that undermined the media’s own credibility before the public, matched by a growing commercialization of news that is slowly breaking down the barriers between news and entertainment’ (p. 144).

who constitute his principal villains'.<sup>508</sup> Marginalising Robbie in the films functions narratively to emphasise the power and influence wielded by entrepreneurial patriarch Jonah. The film's vilification of capitalist patriarchy is therefore facilitated through participating in capitalism's subjugation of non-white people.

The representation of Norman Osborn/Green Goblin critiques entrepreneurial capitalism from a different perspective. Norman's apartment is filled with decadent Victorian décor [Figure 70]. Carved wood furnishings, patterned rugs and candlestick holders appear to have been passed down generations. Large portraits in decorative frames adorning the walls also exhibit the imprint of Norman's ancestors, exuding the family's self-importance and expectation of each new member to live up to their heritage. In the third film, the notion of Harry being pressured to live up to his father is exaggerated to comedic proportions by a portrait of Norman sitting on a chair having the same chair placed in front of it, awaiting a worthy successor [Figure 71]. This space's décor and emphasis on heritage promote the notion that Norman's wealth is ingrained in his lineage.

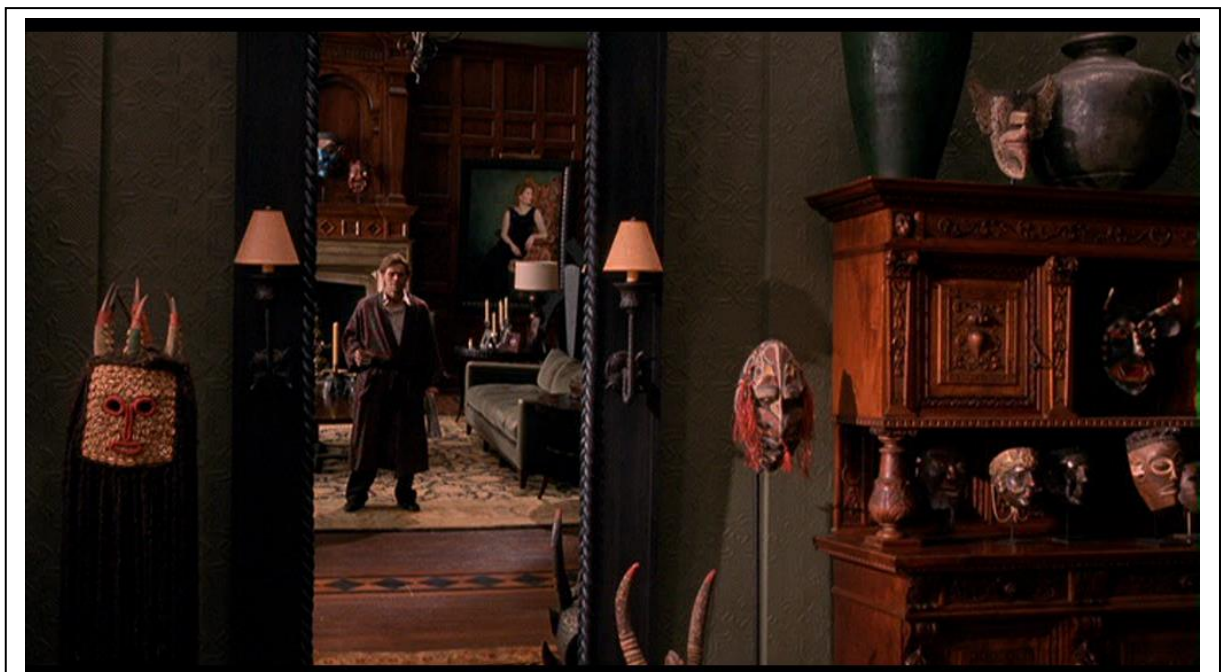


Figure 70 Norman's apartment in Raimi's Spider-Man

<sup>508</sup> Flanagan, "Continually in the Making", p. 42.



Figure 71 A portrait of Norman looms over Harry in Raimi's *Spider-Man 3*

In keeping with the décor's exhibition of ancestral privilege, the tribal masks displayed around this space are presented as treasures gained through Victorian imperialism. Jameson identifies imperialism as the second stage of capitalism, preceding the current stage of multinational capitalism.<sup>509</sup> Following this periodisation, these masks align the Osborn family with an earlier form of capitalism than that which is embodied by his company, Oscorp, thus outlining the Osborns' implication in the development of capitalism. The masks also provide an obvious reflection of the mask Norman wears as Green Goblin, and suggest that sinister psychological traits are ingrained in his lineage. Consequently, while harkening back to the past, this space is not one of nostalgic longing for an idealised home, but instead indicates the form of capitalism Norman embodies and presents it as nefarious.

Victorian décor is at odds with the Manhattan skyscrapers by which the apartment is surrounded. This disjunction between Norman's private space and the city he inhabits is echoed in Norman/Green Goblin's dichotomy as both American entrepreneur and terrorist. The interconnectivity of these roles can be understood through Slavoj Žižek's argument that global capitalism breeds its own excesses, one of these being "fundamentalist" terrorists, and as such the two are part of the same system.<sup>510</sup> The

<sup>509</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 35. The first stage is market capitalism.

<sup>510</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2012). This argument runs throughout the book, but is primarily outlined in the essay 'Reappropriations: The Lessons of Mullah Omar', pp. 41-72.



internal production of these excesses is evident in the assertion that 'every feature attributed to the Other is already present at the very heart of the USA', for instance murderous fanaticism being present in 'Rightist populist 'fundamentalists' who also practise a terror of their own, legitimized by (their understanding of) Christianity'.<sup>511</sup> By partaking in the commodification of violence in the media, Raimi's *Spider-Man* films are complicit in the production of capitalist excesses. However, by interlacing capitalism and terrorism in the figure of Norman/Green Goblin, a reflective commentary is also provided. The entwined nature of Norman/Green Goblin's roles is expressed by the apartment's décor encoding a sinister edge in Norman's entrepreneurial ancestry, placing the two identities on a spectrum rather than as binaries.

While Jonah and Norman's entrepreneurial capitalism is associated with the past, and presented as ridiculous and villainous, respectively, a more (post)modern form of globalised capitalism is evident in the representation of Oscorp. By its faceless and decentred nature, postmodern multinational capitalism lacks specific spaces with which to be associated. Only one scene in Raimi's *Spider-Man* presents a space exclusive to the guardians of this mode of capitalism. The scene is introduced by a shot of Oscorp's skyscraper that tilts upward, signalling a move toward the top of the company's hierarchy. Before the camera reveals much more than the first ten stories, the shot cross-fades to one of Norman sitting at the head of the board table. Leaving a tilt to the top of the building, which typically indicates the physical location of executives' offices, incomplete somewhat abstracts this boardroom from the skyscraper, suggesting that the company's upper echelons are inaccessible. The clinical design of the boardroom, primarily comprised of whites, greys and blacks, amplifies this sense of an untraceable and largely anonymous power. As the camera tracks back from Norman it reveals the formally attired board members sat around the table, five on each side and one at the other end, on identical leather chairs, a cup, saucer and folder laid out before each of them. This regimentation is enhanced by the symmetrical composition, and the hard lighting from above that ensures against

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<sup>511</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

shading imbalances [Figure 72]. Eight out of the eleven board members are middle-aged white males, thus exhibiting the perpetuation of socially ingrained patriarchal privilege within this mode of capitalism.



*Figure 72 The Oscorp boardroom in Raimi's Spider-Man*

The power of this body over the individual is made evident when they force Norman to resign from his own company. Dafoe's uniquely creased visage is harnessed to mark out Norman's individuality as the manager cycles through a range of heightened emotions. When Norman's proud smile falls upon hearing that the company is being sold his skin tightens over his cheekbones. He transitions from an aghast frown to a face scrunched in anger as he yells at the board members, then droops in defeat before his chin pushes forward, recalling Green Goblin's mask and pulling his skin taught in a look of menace. The board members meet Norman's impassioned outburst with cold rigidity and a hint of malicious delight, situating them as a homogenous corporate entity. The film thus presents postmodern multinational capitalism as maintaining impenetrability through being governed by impersonal and inaccessible structures.

The spaces discussed above present different sociopolitical roles available to the young protagonists. Peter can uphold Ben's pro-social values, pursue entrepreneurial privileges or accept subservience within the corporate system. The exploration of these positions challenges Flanagan's argument that the film presents a conservative arc in which Peter is guided into his role within the dominant power structure.<sup>512</sup> Flanagan suggests that the film's modelling of Peter, Harry and Mary Jane on their Silver Age comic book incarnations contributes to this conservative sensibility by appealing to baby boomers rather than addressing the concerns of actual twenty-first century youths.<sup>513</sup> However, although much more innocent than many contemporaneous media representations of teenagers, these youths are not simply rooted in the past. Their clothes are one element that grants them an unstable status. Retro-chic throwbacks like Mary Jane's combination of a pink flowery top, short denim skirt and boots [Figure 73] are placed alongside more contemporary casual attire like Peter's polo shirt and hoodie [Figure 74]. Peter's clothes are far cry from the shirt, tie and sweater vest combos in which Ditko initially presented him. The characters' blend of old and new fashions is also markedly distinct from the teens in *Ultimate Spider-Man*, whose mussed up hair styles and baggy attire adhere to 90s/early 00s 'grunge' influenced fashions [Figure 75]. The teenagers in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films are thus not fully aligned with either the 1960s or twenty-first century, instead situated as intermediary figures.

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<sup>512</sup> Flanagan, Martin. 'Teen Trajectories in Spider-Man and Ghost World', in Gordon, Jancovich and McAllister (ed.), *Film and Comic Books*, p. 139.

<sup>513</sup> Flanagan, 'Teen Trajectories', pp. 147-148.



Figure 73 Mary Jane in a retro-chic outfit in Raimi's *Spider-Man*



Figure 74 Peter in contemporary casual attire in Raimi's *Spider-Man*



Figure 75 Teens, including Mary Jane and Peter, in contemporary grunge fashions in *Ultimate Spider-Man #3*

The apartment that Peter and Harry share in Manhattan also conveys the unmoored status of the teenagers. Objects and styles from a range of times are collected together. Widescreen televisions and speakers are placed alongside wooden furnishings, a grandfather clock and an abstract painting by contemporary modern artist Luc Leestemaker [Figure 76 and Figure 77]. The walls themselves are painted bricks, a contemporary aesthetic that reveals the building's traditional construction and reflects Peter's and Harry's undeveloped state. This décor situates Peter and Harry apart from the specific temporal coding of the spaces aligned with different forms of patriarchy, yet gestures to elements of each, outlining the boys' opportunity to select which values to uphold. The intermediary status of the teens in Raimi's *Spider-Man*, as coded in their clothes and Peter and Harry's apartment, thus primes them to traverse the film's distinct temporally coded spaces.



Figure 76 Peter and Harry's apartment in Raimi's *Spider-Man*



Figure 77 Peter and Harry's apartment in Raimi's *Spider-Man*

Raimi's *Spider-Man* performs a reflective negotiation of different sets of values through the ways it presents, and positions its transitional young characters in relation to, the spaces discussed above. This negotiation is facilitated by the particular adaptive practices of superhero blockbusters. By reenvisioning icons of popular culture who have strong cultural associations with the eras in which

comic books were in their Golden and Silver Ages, the films can reflect on culturally constructed visions of these eras. Raimi's *Spider-Man* foregrounds these associations through affectionately gesturing to, and recreating elements from, Silver Age *Spider-Man* comics, which themselves now contribute to cultural perceptions of the mid-twentieth century as a simpler time when good and evil were clearly distinguishable. The film acknowledges the idealised nature of these perceptions of the past and, by situating them in relation to spaces representative of other times and values, explores a range of sociopolitical ideas.

### Serial Negotiations of the Peter/Spider-Man Spectrum

While Peter/Spider-Man chooses to pursue Ben's pro-social values in the first film, the varied nature of a superhero's spectrum suggests that this role is not fixed for the sequels. The shifts that Peter undergoes in Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* and *3* resituate him in relation to the potential roles presented to him in the first film. Changes in his characterisation and circumstances also continue the series' commentary on patriarchal social structures. A key way that this commentary manifests is in the increased role Mary Jane has in the sequels, particularly the third film. Analysing the changing representation of Peter and Mary Jane in the sequels provides a means to examine how the films frame femininity within the patriarchal structures that they explore.

Peter's continued endeavours to place the needs of others over his own in the second film contribute to his worsened economic status. While Peter's poverty has long been explored in the *Spider-Man* matrix, Holland interlinks Raimi's *Spider-Man 2's* emphasis of this trait with the contemporary climate. Holland argues that the film comments on the fact that 'from 2001-04, the Bush Administration slashed domestic spending and redistributed wealth increasing the impoverishment of most Americans', redirecting government funds to finance the "War on Terror" and introducing tax breaks for the wealthy 1%.<sup>514</sup> As with the previous film, the construction of space plays a key role in expressing this sociopolitical commentary. Peter now occupies a humbler residence. The first time we see his new

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<sup>514</sup> Holland, 'It's Complicated', p. 293.

apartment its entirety is presented in one cramped shot that shows its dilapidated furnishings [Figure 78]. A dull, grubby palette and dim lighting create dark corners that close the space even more. The oldness of this apartment does not evoke longing for an idealised past, but instead suggests impoverishment and disrepair in the present.



Meanwhile, the 1% is presented as impenetrable. Although Doctor Octopus' bank robbery scene realises a nostalgic fantasy of banks having all their money stored in giant safes accessible from the main floor, the scene in which Peter has a photography job at a high society event presents wealth as inaccessible to those without. The recurring gag of Peter failing to grab entrees and drinks from passing plates conveys this idea. Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* therefore reinstates entrepreneurial capitalism as the dominant financial model, and portrays it as a system that sustains itself by keeping the rest of the population in poverty.

The second film also initiates a shift toward an exploration of Mary Jane's subjectivity. In the first two films, Mary Jane ascends a "rags to riches" arc, although she primarily functions as a love interest for Peter and Harry, and figure to be kidnapped by supervillains.<sup>515</sup> However, at the end of the second film,

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<sup>515</sup> The trope of female characters in superhero narratives functioning primarily as motivation for male characters through being kidnapped, maimed, raped and/or murdered has been colloquially termed "fridging" among fandom, following the "Women in Refrigerators" website, started by comic book writer Gail Simone, which collates and lists examples of fridging. The name itself refers to a storyline in *Green Lantern Volume 3* #54, in

after imploring Peter to grant her the agency to make her own decision regarding whether she should date somebody who may place her life in danger, a celebratory shot exhibiting Spider-Man and the digital effects' powers is followed by a melancholic close up of Mary Jane. This momentary contemplation of Mary Jane's feelings primes the third film to explore the character beneath the archetypal glamorous exterior.

In Raimi's *Spider-Man 3*, Mary Jane's treatment by patriarchal structures is illuminated through her treatment by Peter, who adopts an entrepreneurial role that in the previous film was closed off to him. Throughout *Spider-Man 3*, explorations of Mary Jane's subjectivity and Peter's newfound entrepreneurial flair interweave, providing complementary thematic threads. The seeds of these concerns are planted the first time we see Peter's apartment, which remains the same as in the second film. Close ups of Mary Jane sitting on Peter's bed are angled so that his police scanner, notable by its red LED display, is evident in the background [Figure 79], encroaching on their relationship and then forcing him away from her when it broadcasts information about a crime. Once Peter leaves, a wall-to-wall shot of the apartment recalls the one in which it was introduced in the previous film [Figure 80]. However, the brighter lighting makes the space less confining and outlines Mary Jane's isolation by positioning her alone in the width of the frame, while the decrepitude of the apartment accentuates her neglect.<sup>516</sup> The space is used to emphasise Mary Jane's mistreatment over Peter's poverty.

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which Green Lantern discovers that his girlfriend, Alex DeWitt, has been killed by a supervillain and her body left in a refrigerator. *Women in Refrigerators*, <<http://www.lby3.com/wir/>>, accessed on 17 July 2014; Ron Marz (w), Derec Aucoin (p), Darryl Banks (p), et al., 'Forced Entry', *Green Lantern Volume 3 #54* (New York: DC Comics, 1994).

<sup>516</sup> This shot also features the symbiote crawling over Peter's bedside table, outlining another presence that Peter has overlooked.





Figure 79 Peter's police scanner encroaches on his relationship with Mary Jane in Raimi's *Spider-Man 3*



Figure 80 A wide shot of Peter's apartment emphasises Mary Jane's loneliness in Raimi's *Spider-Man 3*

When Peter abandons Mary Jane in his apartment, he does so to help the wider community by responding to an emergency situation broadcast over the police radio. However, his actions later in the film serve a more selfish nature. Having a superhero undergo an unsavoury transformation is a strategy also pursued in *Superman III*. Both *Superman III* and *Spider-Man 3* feature a substance that corrupts the hero: artificial kryptonite and the symbiote, respectively. This narrative device enables the films to offer variation by pushing their superheroes to points on their spectrums that were not explored in the preceding films. As will be demonstrated below, there are significant differences in how the device functions in the two films.

The literal split of identities that occurs when the artificial kryptonite infects Superman presents the evil qualities that manifest as abnormalities. Once infected, the hyper-masculine, stubble-ridden Superman, who is in stark opposition to his usual gentle self, completely represses the mild mannered Clark identity. Clark eventually separates from the Superman identity so that the two can fight. This scene presents Clark as Superman's pure form defeating an imposter, who is situated as an aberration on the Clark/Superman spectrum.<sup>517</sup> Conversely, Peter's objectionable traits are shown to be an inherent part of his spectrum. This is explicitly stated in the films. Once Superman is free from the artificial kryptonite's effects he asserts, in reference to his evil counterpart's actions, "that wasn't me. That was the other guy". In *Spider-Man 3*, Dr. Curt Connors (Dylan Baker) outlines how the symbiote "amplifies characteristics of its host, especially aggression", emphasising that the self-gratifying behaviour Peter exhibits while wearing the symbiote is an amplification of traits he already holds.

*Spider-Man 3* makes clear that Peter harbours deplorable traits before falling under the symbiote's influence. For example, the particularities of Peter's attempted proposal to Mary Jane indicate his affiliation with an entrepreneurial capitalist patriarchy that objectifies women. Despite listening in awe to May's anecdote of Ben proposing on an island at a beach, Peter opts for a proposal rooted conversely in the idea that wealth equates with romance. He selects an upmarket French restaurant as the venue, and enlists a waiter to place the ring in Mary Jane's champagne glass. The fact that the waiter, played by cult icon Bruce Campbell, is so amicable with Peter subverts a running joke through the trilogy in which, as a wrestling announcer then theatre usher, Campbell repeatedly disparages Peter.<sup>518</sup> Campbell now embracing Peter signifies Peter being accepted by the gatekeeper who

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<sup>517</sup> Although presented as an aberration, it should be noted that this evil Superman still draws connections to other incarnations on the Clark/Superman spectrum. In particular, his form of masculinity is comparable to the hard-nosed, dispassionate Superman of early Golden Age comic books. A significant difference is that, while the Golden Age Superman was curt with Lois and rebuffed her romantic advances, *Superman III's* evil Superman is easily compelled by carnal desires.

<sup>518</sup> Bruce Campbell is the star of Sam Raimi's debut feature, *The Evil Dead* (1981), which earned both men cult kudos. Campbell reprised his role in the sequels, *Evil Dead II* (Sam Raimi, 1987) and *Army of Darkness* (Sam Raimi, 1992). His idiosyncratic persona is so central to the series that an alternative title for the third film is *Bruce Campbell vs. Army of Darkness*, while he has a cameo appearance in a post-credits scene to the 2013 remake, *Evil Dead* (Fede Alvarez). While in the decades following the *Evil Dead* films Raimi gravitated toward Hollywood, Campbell cult persona was deployed in more niche horror films. His continued perpetuation of this cult persona

previously obstructed his access to wealth and high society. However, while succeeding to project himself as an affluent individual, Peter's self-absorption causes him to overlook Mary Jane's suffering, which is caused in part by Peter/Spider-Man's actions. The growing segregation between the characters is conveyed by the scene's general progression from shot-reverse-shot cutting between long shots framed from behind each character, which including both in the frame, to narrower compositions. This progression culminates in a series of close ups that isolate Peter and Mary Jane from each other, foregrounding Peter's bewilderment and Mary Jane's anguish. This division of masculinity and femininity that is rooted in the form of patriarchy with which Peter is complying further explicates the distinction between Reeve's Clark/Superman and Maguire's Peter/Spider-Man. While, in *Superman: The Movie*, Clark/Superman's purity is evident in the expression of equality in Superman and Lois' romantic encounters, in *Spider-Man 3* the entrepreneurial qualities that tempt Peter/Spider-Man are exposed by his mistreatment of Mary Jane.

The scenes in which these entrepreneurial traits intensify under the symbiote's influence oscillate between prompting audience distaste at Peter's callous actions, and encouraging laughter at his ridiculous pomposity. These perspectives are evident in other characters' responses to Peter. For example, Robbie and Betty, the two *Bugle* employees most sympathetic to Peter, have expressions of shocked dismay when Peter aggressively confronts Eddie [Figure 81].<sup>519</sup> Elsewhere, female passers-by look on in bemusement as Peter swaggers down the street [Figure 82]. This presentation combines the sinisterness of Norman and ridiculousness of Jonah, encompassing both sides of the first film's critique of entrepreneurial capitalism to ensure that Peter's actions are presented as utterly repugnant.

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is evident in the title of his autobiography, *If Chins Could Kill: Confessions of a B Movie Actor* (New York: LA Weekly Books, 2002) and exemplified in the metafictional narrative of *My Name is Bruce* (2007), which Campbell directed. Roles outside of B movies include frequent cameos in Raimi's films and a leading role in television series *Burn Notice* (USA network, 2007-2013).

<sup>519</sup> The high degree of agency Peter gains within the *Bugle* offices while under the influence of the symbiote is central to his entrepreneurial ascension. Peter ruthlessly exposes the fraudulent practices of Eddie and demands a staff job from Jonah, for which he names his own wage.



*Figure 81 Robbie and Betty are shocked at Peter's callous treatment of Eddie in Raimi's Spider-Man 3*



*Figure 82 Female passers-by look at Peter's swagger with bemusement in Raimi's Spider-Man 3*

While making a public spectacle of himself, Peter's actions most strongly impact individuals who are close to him. This is in contrast to the more general menace enacted by the evil Superman who, for example, torments wider society by straightening the Leaning Tower of Pisa and blowing out the Olympic Torch. By foregrounding the hurt Peter inflicts on individuals, his actions are presented as far more upsetting than Superman's humorously realised affronts to historical iconography. The personal impact of Peter's actions is at its most devastating when he takes Gwen on a date to a jazz club. The scene pointedly jars with the rest of the trilogy through having Peter perform a musical number. This disruption establishes an unstable framework in which the film can push Peter to the furthest points

of entrepreneurial repulsiveness and ridiculousness on his spectrum. As Peter performs a jazz number for Gwen to incite jealousy in Mary Jane, his skilled piano playing and boastful dancing are incongruent with our knowledge and expectations of both Peter and Maguire. Peter's role throughout the trilogy as a nervy romantic and Maguire's air of boyish wonder ensure that, even when Peter swings from a chandelier and recalls the fluid airborne movements of Spider-Man, his attempts at suaveness are laughably awkward. The horrific potential of Peter's entrepreneurial streak is suddenly laid bare after the musical number when he confronts and strikes Mary Jane. This misogynistic impulse recalls the behaviour of Norman in the first film, who advised Harry, at the time dating Mary Jane, to "do what you need to with her then broom her fast", before later, as Green Goblin, dropping her off Roosevelt Bridge.

While Mary Jane's subjugation in this scene denotes a lack of agency it is significant that, amidst all the disruptive elements, she emotionally grounds the scene and Peter. After Mary Jane is struck to the floor, a series of cuts between her and Peter show her physical pain and shock triggering in Peter a moment of self-realisation. High angled shots accentuate Mary Jane's vulnerability [Figure 83], while in the reverse shots Peter's features quiver and shift into a horrified, wide-eyed expression. After Peter notices the black Spider-Man suit showing from under his shirt he flashes a look of shocked revelation at Mary Jane, indicating that she has sparked the realisation that the suit has aggravated his recent shift in character [Figure 84]. The prolonged duration of each take in this series of shots, particularly in contrast to the preceding rapidly edited musical number, outlines both characters' raw emotions. After Peter flees a lingering medium shot of a desolate Mary Jane, still on the floor, directs audience empathy to her [Figure 85]. Both Peter and the audience's identification with Mary Jane is vital to marking out just how far he has been pushed to a narcissistic extreme on his spectrum. The equal attention given to both Mary Jane and Peter in this sequence emphasises not just what she has revealed about him, but her emotional state.



Figure 83 Mary Jane gazes pained and shocked at Peter after he strikes her in Raimi's Spider-Man 3



Figure 84 Peter realises that the symbiote has aggravated his shift in character in Raimi's Spider-Man



Figure 85 The camera lingers on a desolate Mary Jane after Peter leaves the jazz club in Raimi's Spider-Man 3

The dawning realisation on Peter's face in this series of shots encapsulates how his reversion to the more virtuous outlook he held in the previous two films can only be achieved through self-reflection. This internal process contrasts Clark's physical battle against an externalised imposter, and exemplifies how *Spider-Man 3* and *Superman III's* distinct handling of their evil superheroes are rooted in differences between the superhero archetypes that Superman and Spider-Man embody. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, in the 1960s Marvel reconfigured the figure of the superhero by imbuing their characters with anxieties. The symbiote narrative in *Spider-Man 3* provides a means to dramatise Peter's psychological struggle. The symbiote is an expression of the self-serving qualities that have tempted Peter/Spider-Man ever since, in both Silver Age comic books and Raimi's first *Spider-Man* film, he initially used his powers for financial gain, which inadvertently facilitated Ben's death. In *Spider-Man 3*, by fully succumbing to his narcissistic and violent qualities, Peter/Spider-Man has a far more direct negative impact on his loved ones. The focus on anxieties stimulated by

Peter/Spider-Man's dual identity, and the ways these impact those closest to him, that has featured prominently in the *Spider-Man* matrix throughout the character's history, is thus reconfigured and augmented in *Spider-Man 3*.

This attention to character psychology and interpersonal relationships has its understated culmination in the film's closing moments. Although Mary Jane is primarily relegated to her role as kidnap victim in the third act, the emphasis on her perspective poignantly resurfaces in the final scene, which opens on Mary Jane singing 'I'm Through with Love' in the jazz club. As Peter enters she stops, the melancholic score kicks in and once again the two communicate in gazes. The film's pattern of conveying the couple's estrangement by dividing them into separate shots is broken in a medium shot that positions one on either side of the frame [Figure 86]. This symmetrical composition, which recalls the strategies through which Lois and Superman are framed in *Superman: The Movie*, suggests a rebalancing of the gender inequality that Peter has perpetuated throughout the film. Mary Jane and Peter's wistful expressions convey anguish over Harry's death and the destructive impact Peter's actions have had on their relationship. Mary Jane then makes a gesture of forgiveness as she moves toward Peter, closing the empty space between them, and embraces him. The scene restages the climactic moment in *Some Like it Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959) when Sugar (Marilyn Monroe) sings 'I'm through with Love' and Joe (Tony Curtis), dressed as Josephine, approaches and kisses her, causing her to see through his disguise. By alluding to this more affirmative and comedic moment in which doubled identities obstructing two people's relationship collapse, Raimi's *Spider-Man 3* offers hope for Peter and Mary Jane's future. Although the mood of the two scenes is very different, the sense of Peter needing to be considerate to Mary Jane, and of her need for agency, is also suggested through the connotations of *Some Like it Hot*, which pointedly thematises men seeing from feminine perspectives. Peter's newfound consideration of Mary Jane's feelings is in stark contrast to his self-absorption in the earlier proposal scene, and recalls his realisation in the first film that his powers should be used in the service of others, rather than for personal gain. While, in *Some Like it Hot*, upon dropping his disguises as Josephine and billionaire Junior, Joe removes the obstacles blocking his relationship with Sugar,

Peter's obstacles come from within. The unspoken acknowledgement of this, which is writ large on Peter's sorrowful expression that provides the film's final image [Figure 87], signals that much work still needs to be done before Peter and Mary Jane can attain their happy ending.



*Figure 86 Mary Jane and Peter gaze wistfully at each other at the end of Spider-Man 3*



*Figure 87 Peter's sorrowful expression provides the final image of Spider-Man 3*

As with *Superman: The Movie*, deployment of familiar Hollywood genre conventions and intertextual links to specific Hollywood films are used to convey characterisation. Closing with this emulation of classical Hollywood cinema, rather than the exhibitions of digital effects technologies that end the previous films in the series, also offers melancholic reflection over celebration. This break in the series' conventions ensures that even audiences oblivious to the *Some Like it Hot* reference will comprehend



the significance of the scene. While the first film closes with a spectacular display of Spider-Man's abilities, as does the sequel, but follows this with a close up on Mary Jane, the third film seeks to give Peter and Mary Jane equal weight. Peter's need for, and empathy with, Mary Jane, reflects the trilogy's broader theme whereby Spider-Man represents, and relies on the aid of, the citizenry of New York. The sense of hope as Peter gazes regretfully into Mary Jane's sad but forgiving eyes suggests that, while unity and empathy with others are harder to pursue than entrepreneurial self-gratification, they are necessary to fight for. Although diverging from the previous films by shifting Peter/Spider-Man on his spectrum, *Spider-Man 3* therefore reiterates the trilogy's appeal for pro-social values within a climate that favours capitalist enterprise, while providing additional comments on the need for patriarchal structures to embrace feminine perspectives.

### Conclusion

The theoretical models I have been adopting, adapting and extending throughout this chapter have continued my project's work of exploring meanings that superhero blockbusters' style and form evoke. By developing my approach through an aesthetic analysis of Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy's adaptive practices, I have intervened in debates on the ontology and role of CGI in superhero blockbusters, and the nature of the superhero blockbuster's sociopolitical engagement in the twenty-first century. Throughout my analysis I have also illuminated ways that Raimi's *Spider-Man* films do not just metamorphose traits of previous *Spider-Man* texts, but also develop tropes and strategies established by *Superman: The Movie*. In doing so, the films continue to build and refine a cinematic paradigm for the superhero genre.

The particular ways that CGI is deployed in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films provide a framework through which to interrogate discourses of realism that pervade discussions of the digital in cinema. Furthermore, the strategies through which the films create meaning by interlacing CGI with profilmic phenomena reveal how digital filmmaking technologies provide superhero blockbusters with new ways to adapt the thematic tensions that superhero comics convey by juxtaposing different forms. While the ontology of the photographic image creates a demand for CGI in live-action film to appear

realistic, conceptualisations of realism based on movement prove more instructive than those based on indexicality when analysing the presentation and qualities of CGI. Digitally constructed images can express the same abstract sensations of movement as live-action films, while also moving in ways that are perceptually realistic. However, while seeking to correspond with audience understanding of physical reality, CGI in the *Spider-Man* films also showcases the technologies of its creation, and aligns the power of these with Spider-Man's diegetic powers. The formal reflexivity of special effects, and their efforts to offer immersion in a seamless diegetic world, bolster each other. We must therefore pay attention to the interrelation of CGI's abstract, perceptually realistic and conceptual qualities for a full appreciation of the meanings that it can create in superhero blockbusters.

In the realisation of superpowered bodies, issues of realism are reformed into a discourse on the tension between humanity and the digital. While digital inscriptions on villains' bodies provide the source of their disconnect from humanity, the interplay between Spider-Man's digital body and Maguire's profilmic body offers a more complex perspective on this dichotomy. The digital and profilmic aspects of the superhero's body are presented not as oppositions, but parts of the same identity engaged in perpetual dialogue, drawing the two elements into a process of exchange, albeit a fraught one. Spider-Man's digital body acts as an idealised representation of Peter/Spider-Man's heroic self, which is juxtaposed with Maguire's physical body and performance to provide new ways of evoking the tension between heroism and teenage angst that is a key concern of many *Spider-Man* texts. Realising cinematic superheroes through a combination of CGI and profilmic bodies thus provides new ways to articulate the relation between superhero and civilian identity on a character's spectrum.

CGI is also deployed in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films to metamorphose the relationship between Spider-Man and New York's external spaces. While Raimi's *Spider-Man* films exhibit a limited degree of character diversity, focusing exclusively on a group of white characters, the interactions between superhero and city express more inclusive views on community and the collective identity of the U.S..

The bouncing and soaring of the virtual camera and Spider-Man's body expands the head-on propulsion motif from *Superman: The Movie*, while Spider-Man's tactile interactions with a dynamic urban landscape develops the bond that *Superman: The Movie* cultivates between an airborne superhero and unmoored cityscape. Through doing so, the superhero genre's celebration of the city as a space that offers unrestrained mobility is rearticulated with newfound fluidity. Spider-Man's interactions with cityspace extend into his interactions with New York's inhabitants. All three are active agents that work together. Casting Spider-Man, urban space and a multicultural citizenry as a unified force that protects New York presents freedom of movement for a diverse community working in harmony as essential to urban utopianism.

A conceptualisation of utopia is further developed in Raimi's *Spider-Man* through the construction of internal spaces that harken back to past eras. Jameson influentially argues that nostalgic stylisation in films replaces the past with glossy images that leave us unable to locate our present in relation to the past. However, Boym's conceptualisation of reflective nostalgia offers a means of appreciating how nostalgic stylisation can productively negotiate different temporalities. Meanwhile, Hutcheon's conceptualisation of postmodern nostalgia as inherently complicit with, while managing to be critical of, the systems in which it is produced, provides a framework in which we can acknowledge how regressive tendencies are balanced against productive ideas in Raimi's *Spider-Man's* nostalgic stylisation. Interactions between past incarnations of a character and contemporary contexts are a key feature of a superhero's matrix, which always offers a composite of competing elements rather than a unified vision. Consequently, superhero texts are primed to perform a reflective negotiation of past and present. Raimi's *Spider-Man's* rearrangement of the *Spider-Man* matrix involves drawing Silver Age comics back to the centre through reflecting characters from them and constructing certain spaces to adhere to idealised cultural visions of the era in which they were produced. Ben and May's house in particular recreates this era, presenting a vision of working class suburbia in which utopia is aligned with pro-social values. Although complicitous in the perpetuation of white patriarchy, this knowingly idealised space is used to critique the establishment through being placed in opposition to spaces

connected with different eras and forms of capitalist patriarchy. The nature of this compartmentalised spatial construction recalls similar strategies in *Superman: The Movie*. Both films use a range of differently coded spaces to present different roles that their superheroes can adopt. However, while in *Superman: The Movie* these spaces present different aspects of a unified whole, in Raimi's *Spider-Man* the spaces represent distinct value sets that Peter/Spider-Man must choose between.

Raimi's *Spider-Man*'s critique of patriarchal structures is developed in the sequels. This development is achieved through exploring different roles that Peter/Spider-Man can adopt and Mary Jane's agency within these structures. The third film aligns Peter/Spider-Man with the entrepreneurial strain of capitalism that is vilified throughout the trilogy, and interrogates his treatment of Mary Jane. *Superman III* also undertakes the strategy of taking its series in a new direction by pushing its superhero to an evil extreme on their spectrum. However, the differences in how *Superman III* and *Spider-Man 3* execute this strategy, like many of the differences outlined between Superman and Spider-Man throughout this chapter, are rooted in the distinct superhero archetypes that the characters embody. My elucidation of these differences suggests that the analytical models I am using can be applied to any superhero or superhero text to outline its particular inflection of superhero conventions, thus facilitating appreciation of the genre's scope for variation.

My analysis of the films' spatial construction and serialised explorations of the Peter/Spider-Man spectrum illuminates stylistic and adaptive strategies that contribute to an equivocal sociopolitical commentary. The films' conflicting meanings recall Silver Age *Spider-Man* comic books in another respect, exhibiting their ambivalent position of subtly subverting the establishment while supporting it on other levels, suggesting that examples of complicitious critique can be found throughout superhero texts.

The technological spectacle in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films offers another means through which subversion can be found within complicity. For instance, the third act of Raimi's *Spider-Man 3* undermines the thematic exploration of the previous films. Contrary to the trilogy's depiction of the

*Bugle* offices, the television press is presented uncritically, as an instructive force reliably relaying information to the public as the climactic fight unfolds on an under-construction skyscraper. Joseph Michael Sommers suggests the obvious echoing of 9/11 imagery in this setup.<sup>520</sup> Venom and Sandman are not fully implicated in the patriarchal systems that the trilogy explores. Eddie/Venom represents the villainous potential of Peter/Spider-Man, and thus fails to resonate since Peter's entrepreneurial mentality is explored more rigorously through Peter/Spider-Man himself. Similarly, the themes of impoverishment and redemption evoked by Flint/Sandman are more thoroughly explored through Peter in the second and third films. However, as discussed earlier, Venom and Sandman's significance lies in the culmination they provide to the trilogy's exploration of tensions between the physical and the digital. This discourse entwines with and bolsters the film's allegorical resonance when Peter forgives Flint for killing Uncle Ben, which Sommers and Leaver both argue promotes diplomacy over reactionary violence.<sup>521</sup> Through Peter's compassion, Sandman is permitted to disintegrate into digital grains of sand that drift elegantly into the Manhattan skyline and behind a skyscraper, their rippling formation recalling the natural beauty of a flock of birds. This synthesis of the digital and the natural, and Sandman's dissipation into New York, suggest that he is now integrated into, and no longer a threat to, the city. The physical and the digital are reconciled through this final collapsing of a binary that has been unstable throughout a trilogy in which New York is frequently a composite of indexical and digital elements. Staging this event on Manhattan's skyline suggests that the diplomacy and sympathy exhibited by flawed hero Peter/Spider-Man, himself bonded to New York and America, needs to be suffused into the city and country as a whole. Thus, the reconciliation of the physical and the digital augments the simultaneous dismantling of the good/evil, hero/villain and America/Other binaries. This gesture potently reaffirms the films' conceptualisation of utopia. Whereas in *Superman:*

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<sup>520</sup> Joseph Michael Sommers, 'The Traumatic Revision of Marvel's Spider-Man: From 1960s Dime-Store Comic Book to Post-9/11 Moody Motion Picture Franchise', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 37:2 (2012), p. 201.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203; Leaver, 'Artificial Mourning', p. 163.

*The Movie* utopia is expressed in the romantic couple and unfettering of emotion, in Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy utopia is located in the harmonious urban community.

A superhero blockbuster's meanings and sociopolitical commentary are illuminated through interrogating its aesthetics of adaptation, which develop and expand as the films harness new technologies. My examination of this process has demonstrated that Raimi's *Spider-Man* films, which were instrumental to the twenty-first century superhero blockbuster boom, in many ways still foreground comic books as the adapted medium, but also metamorphose elements of previous superhero films. One form that this intertextual dialogue takes, which has been observed throughout this chapter, is the sequels' development of and/or responses to traits of previous films in the series. This exploration of how superhero blockbusters integrate serialisation into their aesthetics of adaptation continues in my next chapter's examination of the MCU.

### Chapter Three – Earth’s Mightiest Superhero Blockbuster: Networked Seriality and the Team Narrative

The *Superman* story in *Action Comics* #1 ends with the eponymous hero seemingly falling to his doom, captions promising that the story would be continued in the next issue. Seriality was thus established as a key trait of the superhero genre upon its genesis. Seriality in superhero comic books developed from a linear chronology in a single series into a networked model, in which different characters owned by the same publisher, such as Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman (all owned by DC), could meet in one another’s titles. Each individual superhero’s series was situated in a shared universe. While *Superman: The Movie* inscribed strategies of serialisation into the production and textuality of the New Hollywood blockbuster, the subsequent attempt to adapt the comic book model of a multi-series networked diegesis into cinema by introducing *Supergirl* (Jeannot Szwarc, 1984) to the same universe was cut short by that film’s commercial failure.<sup>522</sup> Decades later, Marvel succeeded in adapting this model to film.<sup>523</sup> In 2012, Marvel Studios’ *The Avengers*, in which characters from five previously released films in four different series come together as a superhero team, showcased the interconnectivity of what is officially dubbed the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). This chapter examines how the strategies through which the MCU adapts a networked model of seriality affect the aesthetics of superhero blockbusters. I undertake this exploration through close analysis of *The Avengers*, interrogating how its mode of intertextuality and presentation of the superhero team impact the theoretical models and elements of style that have been the focus of previous chapters.

The scale and interconnectivity of the MCU’s multi-series networked diegesis are such that in order to analyse *The Avengers* it is necessary for me to discuss the film alongside other MCU texts throughout the chapter. Due to the consistent branding that Marvel have sought to maintain, I will refer to the films with MCU as a prefix where clarity is required. The MCU’s image as a unified range of corporate

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<sup>522</sup> For an account of *Supergirl’s* development, production and subsequent commercial failure see Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, pp. 145-157.

<sup>523</sup> Some superhero film franchises of the 2000s did attempt to form multi-series film continuities: *Elektra* (Rob Bowman, 2005) and *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (Gavin Hood, 2009) both grew out of other series, but neither were met with critical or commercial success.

products, rather than auteurist cinema, has led much academic discussion to focus on the ways it has remoulded Hollywood's industrial practices.<sup>524</sup> Erecting an art/commerce binary and situating the films as purely commercial risks overlooking the significance of their textual qualities. This trend develops discourses on the aesthetic degradation of the New Hollywood blockbuster paradigm that have been prevalent since the 1970s.<sup>525</sup> Ryan Vu articulates these concerns:

Marvel is pioneering a new model for big-budget movies as cultural events, one that more closely resembles a major product roll-out from a hip corporation like Apple, with the attendant waves of hype, speculation and post-launch analysis, than as standalone experiences. From a studio perspective this could seem like necessary risk reduction given an increasing dependence on the success of tent-pole movies and their multiple revenue streams to generate profit. From an aesthetic perspective, it would be a move that continues the long march in mass entertainment towards the irrelevance of critical judgement.<sup>526</sup>

The anxiety that Vu expresses stems from a conviction that the MCU's serialised form prevents critical evaluation of its texts as discrete objects. However, as poststructuralist theory demonstrates, no text functions independently, but must be viewed in terms of its dialogic relations with other texts. The MCU is therefore not impervious to aesthetic analysis, but demands models of interpretation that move beyond structuralist approaches. This chapter tests whether the MCU's networked model of seriality can be considered alongside its films' style and form to enhance critical evaluation of the films' process of adaptation and meanings.

Whereas the previous two chapters provided surveys of the matrices of the superheroes under analysis, this chapter begins by discussing some of the main types of team narratives found in superhero comic books. The previous chapters have demonstrated that a superhero who has passed between creative teams and media over the course of decades will have a broad and varied matrix. By

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<sup>524</sup> For a detailed and informative analysis of strategies Marvel Studios undertook to realise their initial cinematic ventures, and discursively position themselves, an independent studio, as a leading force in Hollywood blockbuster production, see Derek Johnson, 'Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence', *Cinema Journal*, 52.1 (2012), pp. 1-24. A significant portion of Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone's *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon* also approaches the MCU from an industrial perspective. The authors focus on concerns such as how Marvel Studios reconfigure and combine practices of studio era Hollywood and New Hollywood, and reconceptualise the image and organisation of the Hollywood studio. For the bulk of this industrial analysis, see pp. 11-32 and pp. 35-77.

<sup>525</sup> For example, see Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood'.

<sup>526</sup> Ryan Vu, 'Marvel Cinematic Universality', *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 9:1 (2016), p. 130.



outlining the functions and strategies of key kinds of superhero team formations, I consider how these formations manage the potentially great breadth of the team members' overlapping continuities and matrices.

I then explore whether Marvel Studios' desire to adapt these team narratives, and the ways through which they pursue this goal, necessitates a reworking of how we conceptualise the adaptive practices of superhero blockbusters. I first compare the networked model of seriality in superhero comic books to the one deployed in the MCU, considering if any alterations are made to this model and its strategies in its transition to cinema. Through adapting this model of serialisation, Marvel Studios endeavour to form the MCU into an interwoven shared universe. This emphasis on interconnectivity within a networked diegesis raises the question of whether, as the MCU expands, it continues to engage with a wider textual matrix in the ways that have been observed in previous chapters. I primarily explore this question through analysis of fractures to the cinematic representation of Bruce Banner/Hulk as three different approaches to the character were made within a ten-year period. Analysing the intertextual strategies these approaches deploy enables me to evaluate how the two interpretations of the character in the MCU situate themselves in relation to the MCU's diegesis and *Hulk* matrix.

After examining whether the MCU interacts with a textual matrix in ways comparable to other superhero films, I explore whether the other model that I have adapted from Brooker, a character spectrum, is modified in *The Avengers*. Each superhero from the MCU potentially has their own spectrum that must be factored into *The Avengers*, in which the characters are also placed in relation to one another. I undertake my exploration of what happens to these spectrums through analysis of two elements that in previous chapters have been shown to play significant roles in mapping character's spectrums: space and bodies. In my discussion of bodies I look at ways in which profilmic and digitally rendered materials are utilised to realise the various superheroes. I consider whether interactions between these body types are presented in ways that are abstract, perceptually realistic or conceptual, and through doing so outline what happens to these previously discussed categories of

representation in the team film. Through analysing various encounters between characters I also illuminate the methods by which the film organises its characters.

Finally, I explore ways in which the MCU's networked structure and *The Avengers'* use of space and bodies affects the presentation of sociopolitical values. In the previous chapter, I explored how sociopolitical ideas are represented by, and exchanged between, different spaces in Raimi's *Spider-Man*. I now consider whether the MCU's networked mode of seriality develops this strategy into one in which values are exchanged between films, and if characters themselves exchange values when they meet in *The Avengers*. To draw together a discussion of which values are circulated and promoted in *The Avengers*, and how this process is enacted, I analyse the climactic battle in Manhattan, an exemplar of the urban metropolis that is integral to the superhero genre, and examine how utopia is located within this space.

### Team Narratives in Superhero Comic Books

The superhero team provides a diegetic manifestation of the model of networked seriality that is practiced in DC's and Marvel's superhero comic books. Different superheroes' comic book series are released on a typically monthly basis alongside one another, and their events are implied to occupy a similar period of diegetic time unless explicitly stated otherwise (by, for instance, editors notes that indicate a story takes place before or after another one, or the premise of a series situating it in the diegetic past or future of the universe, such as future-set series *Legion of Super-Heroes* and *Spider-Man 2099*). Team narratives literalise this parallel existence by having different superheroes meet up and work together. Superhero teams are featured in a range of narrative configurations and often presented using stylistic strategies that both articulate and manage the structure of the universe they inhabit. Three of the main formations in which characters' paths cross in comic books are team-ups, team comics and crossover events.

Team-ups can occur when one or more characters appear in another character's story, fight one another and/or work together against a common foe, such as Angel of the X-Men featuring in the *Iron*

*Man* story 'The New Iron Man Meets the Angel' in *Tales of Suspense* #49.<sup>527</sup> Team-ups can also occur in separate series, such as *Marvel Team-Up*, in which each issue features two or more Marvel characters fighting one another and/or working together.<sup>528</sup> The fight between superheroes is a key trope, particularly the first time two heroes meet, as it gives readers the pleasure of seeing how the superheroes compare to one another.<sup>529</sup> This is such a pervasive practice that Richard Reynolds discusses it as 'hierarchical continuity', in which fans collate their knowledge of various superhero battles to position superheroes on a hierarchy based on their power.<sup>530</sup> Whereas Brooker uses the term 'continuity canon' to describe the maintenance of a coherent narrative within a diegesis, as discussed in my review of literature, the notion of 'hierarchical continuity' suggests that multiple superheroes within a diegesis are also interconnected through other means.<sup>531</sup> Narrative continuity enables stories to be organised into a linear chronology. Hierarchical continuity places characters from this diegesis into comparative relations that are mapped by superheroes' battles with one another and the non-linear connections that readers draw between these encounters. Such character hierarchies recall the textual hierarchies in superhero's matrices that I have been outlining throughout this thesis. The construction of hierarchies for characters and texts, both of which are organised in part by textual strategies, thus provide a significant means of guiding audience engagement with superhero narratives.

Team comics feature groups of superheroes working together in ongoing series. Shirrel Rhoades identifies the Justice Society of America, first appearing in *All-Star Comics* #3 (1940), as the first

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<sup>527</sup> Stan Lee (w), Steve Ditko (p) and P. Reinman (i), 'The New Iron Man Meets the Angel!', *Tales of Suspense* #49 (January 1964) (repr. in Cory Sedlmeier, *Marvel Masterworks: The Invincible Iron Man Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2010), pp. 155-173).

<sup>528</sup> Roy Thomas (w), Len Wein (w), Ross Andru (p), et al., *Marvel Team-Up* (New York: Marvel Comics, March 1972-February 1985).

<sup>529</sup> Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone associate this trope specifically with Marvel, discussing it as 'the familiar Marvel narrative motif of heroes first meeting in aggressive circumstances'. Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, p. 119.

<sup>530</sup> Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>531</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. 154.

superhero team.<sup>532</sup> Superhero teams can be formed of characters originally introduced as solo heroes, such as the Justice League of America, or characters conceived of as teammates, such as the Fantastic Four. Two central pleasures offered by team comics become apparent in Grant Morrison's discussion of different configurations of the Justice League. Of the original team, he states that 'the Justice League of America had been assembled in 1960 to feature all of DC's best and most popular superheroes in epic battles against foes that no single superhero, not even Superman, could hope to face alone'.<sup>533</sup> However, in the 1980s the line-up and dynamic changed, with *Justice League International* playing out as 'a witty soap opera, filled with dysfunctional, bickering superheroes'.<sup>534</sup> Team comics can promise more spectacular battles and threatening foes than those found in solo titles, or foreground and develop relationships between superheroes. These two traits can be balanced against each other to varying degrees.

The pleasures offered by team comic books can be announced by their covers. Archetypal covers from the 1960s depict the team battling a huge monster, as evident in Morrison's analysis of the covers for *The Brave and the Bold* #28 [Figure 88] (which features the first appearance of the Justice League of America) and *Fantastic Four* #1 [Figure 89].<sup>535</sup> *The Avengers* #1's cover shows the team approach Loki, readying for battle [Figure 90].<sup>536</sup> While in terms of stature Loki does not dwarf the team, the image is presented from over his shoulder, placing him in the foreground and making him the largest figure in the image. Through the relative sizes of figures these covers quite literally suggest that the teams will be facing threats bigger than their individual selves. These images do not possess the singular iconic pull of the covers for *Action Comics* #1 and *Amazing Fantasy* #15, which direct our attention to

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<sup>532</sup> Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 41; Gardner Fox (w) and Everett E. Hibbard (a), 'The First Meeting of the Justice Society of America', *All-Star Comics* #3 (New York: National Comics, December 1940).

<sup>533</sup> Morrison, *Supergods*, p. 290.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290. Keith Giffen (w), J.M. DeMatteis (w), Kevin Maguire (p), et al., *Justice League International* #7-25 (New York: DC Comics, November 1987-April 1989).

<sup>535</sup> Morrison, *Supergods*, p. 90; Gardner Fox (w), Mike Sekowsky (p), Bernard Sachs (i), et al., 'Justice League of America', *The Brave and the Bold* #28 (New York: DC Comics, 1960).

<sup>536</sup> Stan Lee (w), Jack Kirby (p) and Dick Ayers (i). 'The Coming of The Avengers', *The Avengers* #1 (September 1963) (repr. in Cory Seldmeier, *Marvel Masterworks: The Avengers Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2009), pp. 1-22).

Superman and Spider-Man respectively by centrally positioning the heroes in their eye-catching costumes. Analysing the cover of *Fantastic Four* #1, Morrison argues that the reader's gaze is 'swept around the page in constant motion' by a composition that positions the team in a 'swirling figure eight'.<sup>537</sup> Similarly, on the cover of *The Brave and the Bold* #28 each member of the Justice League of America is engaged with a different arm of giant-starfish villain Starro. These arms act as spokes of a wheel that whirl the reader's gaze around from one superhero to another. Morrison notes that the placement of speech balloons also contributes to the swirling effect of the *Fantastic Four* cover. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Amazing Fantasy* offset Spider-Man's centrality somewhat, and introduced his anxiety, by having his speech balloon compete for our attention. The covers for the first issues of *Fantastic Four* and *The Avengers* feature even more written words in speech balloons and captions surrounding the teammates. This visual frenzy suggests a multiplication of the action and adventure associated with superhero narratives beyond what an individual superhero can offer. Along with a banner on the cover for *The Avengers* that reads 'Earth's Mightiest Super-Heroes', this strategy promotes a hierarchical superiority to solo superhero comics in terms of spectacle.

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<sup>537</sup> Morrison, *Supergods*, p. 91.

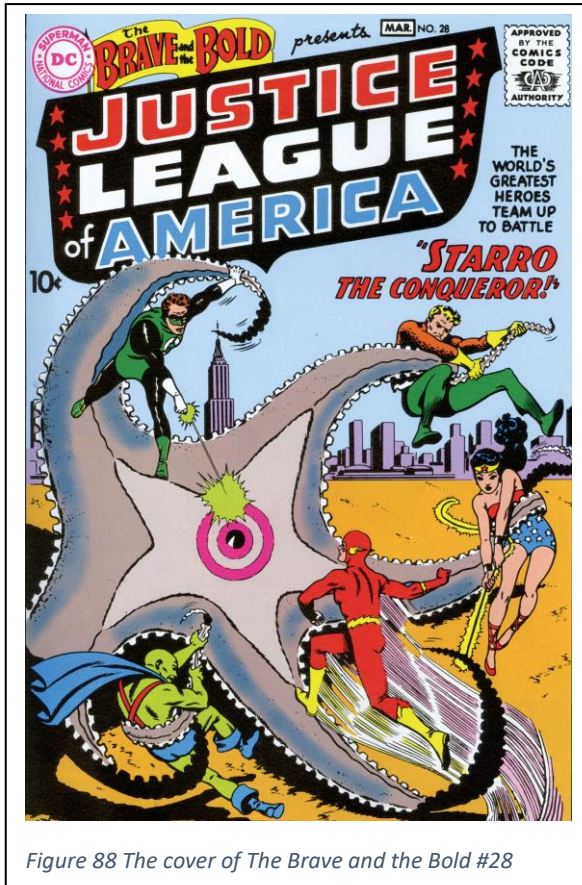


Figure 88 The cover of *The Brave and the Bold* #28



Figure 89 The cover of *The Fantastic Four* #1



Figure 90 The cover of The Avengers #1

Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone explain that team comics provide new ways of aggravating the Marvel superhero archetype's personal anxieties, while compounding a superhero's problems by forcing them into fraught interpersonal relationships with other insecurity-ridden superheroes.<sup>538</sup> Marvel team comics can thus continue to explore a character's personal issues, but can also engender a shift of emphasis to interpersonal tensions. This shift is evident in Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone's analysis of the Fantastic Four, who they argue set the precedent that 'Marvel teams would have to work hard merely to stay *as* a team: they would easily, if temporarily, disintegrate'.<sup>539</sup> *The Avengers #1* demonstrates this change of focus from the problems of the individual to problems within a group. The story concerns Loki tricking Thor, Iron Man, Wasp and Ant-Man into fighting Hulk. While Silver Age *Hulk* comic books typically explore Bruce Banner's struggles to repress his destructive alter-ego, Hulk, the struggle in *The Avengers #1* is not an internal one of the psyche, but an external contest between multiple combatants. Once the other superheroes uncover Loki's ruse they work together with Hulk to defeat Loki, but the initial schism between teammates is not fully reconciled. Tensions between Hulk and the other Avengers develop until he leaves the team at the end of *The Avengers #3*.<sup>540</sup> In subsequent *Avengers* stories Hulk frequently features as an antagonist, a hero who is accepted back onto the team, or an unstable figure caught between both roles. By continually foregrounding the team's dynamic over Bruce/Hulk's psychological torment, these stories suggest that the individual concerns of solo titles must be compressed when characters are brought together in team narratives.

Hulk's initial departure from the Avengers, and replacement by Captain America in *The Avengers #4* (1964), demonstrates that the line-up of a superhero team can change over time.<sup>541</sup> For example, in 2002 the Avengers team in Marvel's 616 universe featured superheroes such as Firestar, Jack of Hearts

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<sup>538</sup> Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121. Emphasis in original.

<sup>540</sup> Stan Lee (w), Jack Kirby (p) and P. Reinman (i), 'Sub-Mariner!', *The Avengers #3* (January 1964) (repr. in Seldmeier, *The Avengers Volume 1*, pp. 47-72).

<sup>541</sup> Stan Lee (w), Jack Kirby (a), 'Captain America Joins... the Avengers!', *The Avengers #4* (March 1964) (repr. in Seldmeier, *The Avengers Volume 1*, pp. 73-96).



and Wonder Man alongside many of the founding team members. In the same year, the Ultimate Universe incarnation of the team, named The Ultimates, reformed a line-up based on early Silver Age *Avengers* comics: Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Wasp, Ant Man/Giant Man and Hulk.<sup>542</sup> Particular line-ups can therefore be drawn into positions of centrality within a superhero team's network of incarnations, thus enacting another form of hierarchical arrangement.

A comic book crossover event also has a hierarchical structure. Wright identifies Marvel's 1984 *Marvel Superheroes Secret Wars* as the first crossover event, the commercial success of which led to crossover events becoming regular features for both Marvel and DC.<sup>543</sup> Crossover events concern a story of such scope that it encompasses multiple heroes, and often has repercussions that effect the whole of a publisher's universe. Superheroes are typically either united together against a common foe, such as in DC's first crossover event *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, or divided into teams that fight one another, such as in Marvel's *Civil War*.<sup>544</sup> The main storyline is told in a limited series, while 'tie-in' limited series can tell other story threads, and characters' ongoing series can concern their specific role in the story. The limited series that tells the main story is hierarchically positioned above the secondary limited series and ongoing series, which are supplementary, although are intended to offer a richer experience.

In featuring storylines that ripple across a publisher's universe, crossover events do not just diegetically literalise the interconnectivity of the fictional universe, like team comics do, but also sketch the breadth of the universe itself. This alteration in focus and scope becomes evident if we compare the first issue covers of some of the archetypal crossover events to those of team comics discussed earlier. The cover of *Marvel Superheroes Secret Wars* #1 presents a group of Marvel's heroes projected toward the fourth wall from a vanishing point that is roughly in the page's centre [Figure 91]. As characters

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<sup>542</sup> In most incarnations, Ant-Man/Giant Man's powers enable him to both shrink and grow, hence the double superhero alias.

<sup>543</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, p. 278; Jim Shooter (w), Michael Zeck (p), John Beatty (i), et al., *Marvel Superheroes Secret Wars* #1-12 (New York: Marvel Comics, May 1984-April 1985).

<sup>544</sup> Marv Wolfman (w), George Pérez (p), Dick Giordano (i), et al., *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #1-12 (New York: DC Comics, April 1985-March 1986); Mark Millar (w), Steve McNiven (p), Dexter Vines (i), et al., *Civil War* #1-7 (New York: Marvel Comic, July 2006-January 2007). These are the details for limited series that tell the main storyline of each event.

spread outward some of them reach beyond the edges of the page, suggesting that the events depicted in this story have significance beyond the individual comic. The cover of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #1 develops this use of the physical space of the page to indicate scope. The comic features a 'wraparound' cover, in which the image of an intergalactic and multiversal battle continues on the back cover [Figure 92]. Some characters and design elements from the front cover spread beyond its left edge, and it is only when the comic is opened and held flat that the full composition is viewable. However, even with the image spread over these two pages, parts of certain characters are still cut off by the page edges. The unfolding covers represent the expansiveness of DC's multiverse, and suggest that this grand fictional construct is encased in the pages between these covers, while simultaneously indicating that the parameters of the multiverse are necessarily greater than can be covered in a single comic. The covers of team comics that I analysed present the teams in their entirety, thus functioning to contain their chosen elements of the wider universe; the covers of *Marvel Superheroes Secret Wars* #1 and *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #1 suggest that their uni/multiverses cannot be fully contained.

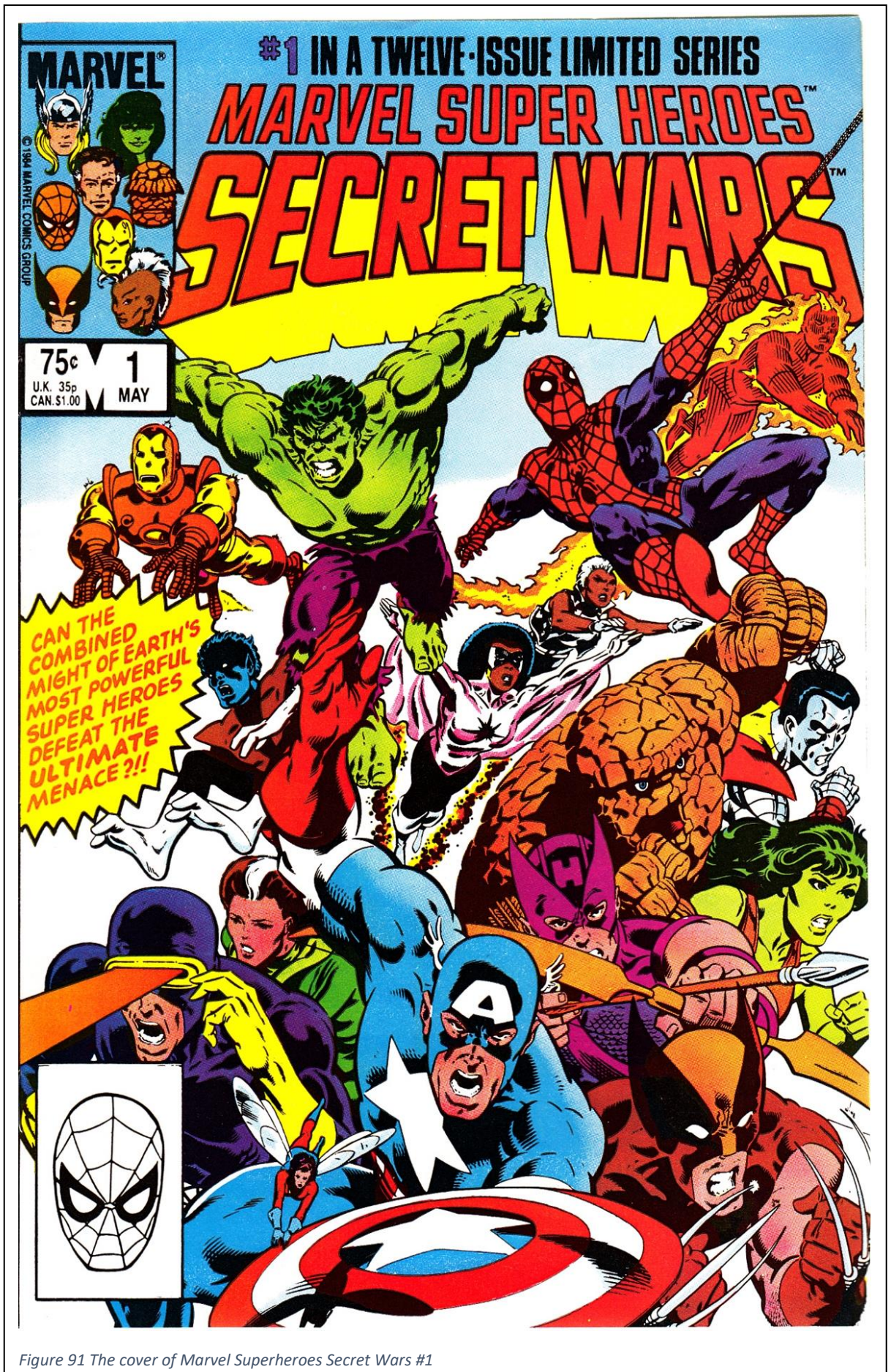


Figure 91 The cover of Marvel Superheroes Secret Wars #1



Figure 92 The wraparound cover of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #1

Crossover events therefore seek to compress their publisher’s fictional uni/multiverse into a single title while concurrently showcasing its breadth. Compression can also be an explicit function of these stories. For example, the primary outcome of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*’ narrative was to consolidate the multiverse into a single universe. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* exemplifies the key role crossover events have come to play in managing their publisher’s universe, functioning as ‘the driver of current canon formation’.<sup>545</sup> By concerning events that resonate throughout the universe, crossover events draw its disparate points together while laying the foundations for future developments. The ontology of comic book imagery augments this dual logic of containing and illuminating a broad fictional construct. Pedler uses covers of crossover events, with *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #1 being one of his examples, to demonstrate that the drawn static images of comics enable each image element in complex

<sup>545</sup> Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, p. 97.

compositions to be presented in full focus so that each can be scanned in their entirety at the reader's leisure.<sup>546</sup> In being given visual mastery of these detailed compositions, the comics reader is concurrently granted mastery over the uni/multiverses that the images represent.

The dual logic through which team formations in superhero comic books compress while showcasing their characters and universe is linked to their management of hierarchies. Extracting characters from their solo titles enables them to be placed in relation to one another through comparisons of powers and personalities. Suggesting that individual titles can contain and manage significant areas from, or the entirety of, a vast uni/multiverse, situates these titles as key to understanding the uni/multiverse's interconnectivity and development. The medium of film offers fresh ways for these formations and strategies to be adapted.

### Adapting to a Cinematic Universe

While blockbuster films such as *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: The Movie* (Bryan Spicer, 1995), *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000) and *Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005) had previously featured superhero teams, MCU *Avengers* was the first film to draw together incarnations of superheroes who had each been previously introduced in films set in a shared diegesis. In this sense, the MCU adapts not just comic book characters, but also the model of networked serialisation practiced by comic books. This mode of adaptation raises important questions about the extent to which the desire to recreate comic book seriality in film alters the adaptive practices of superhero blockbusters. By adapting the networked model of serialisation from comic books, does the MCU also adapt this model's strategies of hierarchical management of characters and texts? With the heightened emphasis on interconnectivity between texts within the networked diegesis, do MCU films continue to interact with a wider textual matrix?

William Proctor outlines the nature of the MCU's multi-series interconnectivity:

As with comic book seriality, sub-series of the MCU unfold sequentially and linearly—one can watch the *Iron Man* series in a causal 'straight line', for example. However, the MCU also

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<sup>546</sup> Pedler, 'The Fastest Man Alive', p. 259. Pedlar also uses the wraparound covers for *Civil War* as examples.

unfolds non-linearly with parallel narratives that all inter-weave within the same story tapestry.<sup>547</sup>

The synchrony of the series within the MCU extends to their production and release schedules, which reveal both points of similarity and divergence with the comic book model of networked serialisation. Release schedules differ between the two media: while instalments of different comic book series set in the same universe can be released on the same day and average twelve a year per series, only two MCU films are released per year on average, with these releases oscillating between different series.<sup>548</sup> Although the MCU's film release schedule is drastically reduced in comparison to that of superhero comic books in a shared universe, it accelerates the typical release schedules for serialised Hollywood cinema. Henderson's examination of the Hollywood sequel suggests that the common timeframe for a sequel's release is two to three years after its predecessor, which accommodates production time.<sup>549</sup> This timeframe is largely apparent in 2000's superhero film series such as Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002, 2004 and 2007), Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy (2005, 2008 and 2012)<sup>550</sup> and even series within the MCU. This gap can be constricted through back to back shooting, a strategy for which *Superman: The Movie* set a precedent, as discussed in my first chapter. Films shot back to back tend to be released a year apart, making the releases annual events. Marvel achieve their schedule not through back to back filming, but *parallel* filming, enabled by each series having a largely discrete cast and crew. The parallel but interlinked nature of each MCU series' narratives is therefore reflected in their parallel production, which recalls the parallel production of comic book series. While the release

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<sup>547</sup> William Proctor, 'Avengers Assembled: The Marvel Transmedia Universe', *Scope*, 26 (2014), p. 8.

<sup>548</sup> *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau) and *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier) were both released in 2008, although it took a few years after that before the regular schedule was established. No MCU films were released in 2009, due to Marvel needing to ensure their first films were commercially successful before committing to a regular production schedule (Derek Johnson outlines how Relativity Media arranged independent financing for these films, but the deal involved Marvel losing film rights to twelve of their characters if these films were commercial failures. The initial films therefore acted as a means to test the viability of Marvel's filmmaking efforts. Johnson, 'Cinematic Destiny', p. 11). *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau) was released in 2010, *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh) and *Captain America* (Joe Johnson) in 2011, and *The Avengers* in 2012. Since then the two films per year schedule has remained consistent. At the time of writing, Marvel plan to increase the schedule to three films a year from 2017 onwards.

<sup>549</sup> Henderson, *The Hollywood Sequel*, pp. 36-40.

<sup>550</sup> *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*.

schedules of the films cannot match the pace of comic books, their production patterns exhibit strong similarities with those of networked comic book serialisation

Although series in a comic book publisher's universe can be produced and released in parallel, this by no means grants them equal status. The team formations discussed earlier deploy various strategies to assert hierarchical superiority over other titles. Crossover events' hierarchical organisation of narrative threads that form a large but discrete story unit is particularly comparable to the 'phases' into which Marvel separate their films. For example, 'phase one' acts as a storytelling unit that contains, in order of release, *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008), *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), *Captain America* (Joe Johnson, 2010), and culminates in *The Avengers*. The limited series that tells the main narrative in a crossover event is situated similarly to *The Avengers* in the textual network. Both are the site at which the key characters from other series are brought together. These hierarchically superior ensemble texts effectively contain the other texts in their unit by providing, in the case of a crossover event, the plot that holds the others together and, in the case of *The Avengers*, the realisation of a narrative thread running through phase one concerning the coming together of a superhero team. This management of multi-series narrative units is a method of arranging a textual hierarchy within a single diegetic universe.

The release patterns of comic book crossover events and the MCU's phases provide a significant point of differentiation. The success of early crossover events from both Marvel and DC led to their increased production in the 1990s and 2000s, eventually becoming annual events for both publishers. This introduced, as Bart Beaty explains, 'a "summer event" sensibility into the comics industry that was directly imported from Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking of the same era'.<sup>551</sup> Crossover events are annual events, and the whole of their narrative unit is told within this annual window, with the main limited series released in parallel to supplementary series. While MCU films are biannual blockbuster

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<sup>551</sup> Bart Beaty, 'The Blockbuster Superhero', in Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann and Art Simon (ed.), *American Film History: Selected Readings, 1960 to the Present* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p. 425.

events, the phases themselves span multiple years: phase one unfolded in films released from 2008 to 2012.<sup>552</sup> The MCU therefore expands the scope of the event-orientated narrative unit beyond annual structures. This extended duration is a means of expressing a sense of scale that is grander than events in other incarnations of the Marvel universe. In doing so, this narrative configuration asserts superiority over these other universes in what I will call the Marvel multiverse.<sup>553</sup>

A final form of hierarchy that Marvel's networked model of serialisation maintains is a media hierarchy. The MCU is composed not just of feature films, but also short films, television shows, comic books and other texts. Due to the MCU engaging in transmedia storytelling, a term influentially conceptualised by Henry Jenkins, Proctor proposes that it should be called the Marvel Transmedia Universe (MTU).<sup>554</sup> Proctor argues that 'the MTU is a sub-branch of the entire Marvel multiverse with the MCU as a separate branch of the MTU'.<sup>555</sup> For Proctor, the MTU demarcates a universe within the Marvel multiverse, while the feature films are just one aspect of this universe. However, it is important to acknowledge that the feature films determine the nature of texts in other media within the universe. For example, short films that are included on the feature films' home video releases require knowledge of at least one or more of the features to fully understand their narrative. The first of these, *Marvel One-Shot: The Consultant* (Leythum, 2011), is included on the *Thor* release, and presents S.H.I.E.L.D. agents Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg) and Jasper Sitwell (Maximiliano Hernández) discussing being ordered to recruit Emil Blonsky/Abomination (Tim Roth) against their wishes. The agents conspire to send a

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<sup>552</sup> Narratively and commercially defined units such as trilogies that are released over the span of multiple years have existed in cinema for decades. However, Marvel's phases are unique in the way they contain multiple series and are themselves serialised in the ongoing, regular release schedule.

<sup>553</sup> As has been discussed, publishers also use multiverses as diegetic constructs in which characters from one universe can meet others, as is the case with DC's characters from Earth-1, Earth-2, Earth-3, etc. I am now using the term to refer to a metatextual construct comparable to an individual character's matrix, in which different incarnations in various media can coexist and vie for centrality without diegetically overlapping. However, these two uses of the term are not mutually exclusive. For example, *Spider-Man* crossover event *Spider-Verse* situates the universes from incarnations such as *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends* and *Supaidāman* within the same diegetic multiverse as the 616 Marvel universe. Dan Slott (w), Olivier Coipel (a), Justin Ponsor (c), et al., 'Spider-Verse', *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 3* #9-15 (New York: Marvel Comics, January 2015-April 2015). These are the details for the limited series that tells that main storyline.

<sup>554</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: University Press, 2006), pp. 95-134; William Proctor, 'Avengers Assembled'.

<sup>555</sup> Proctor, 'Avengers Assembled', p. 10.



'consultant' who is so arrogant that he will unwittingly sabotage the recruitment. It is then revealed that the meeting they are arranging is the one at the end of *The Incredible Hulk*, when Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) approaches General Ross (William Hurt). The short shifts the audience's understanding of this scene in *The Incredible Hulk* by disclosing the motivation behind sending Tony, but requires knowledge of the feature film for this meaning to be comprehended. This subordinate status is generally the case with all texts other than the feature films in the MCU. These texts add to the overall narrative, but their dependency on the feature films means that they are not self-contained, and are positioned as hierarchically inferior. The commonplace of textual hierarchies in transmedia storytelling is evidenced by the emergence of, as Suzanne Scott explains, "mothership" 'as an industrial buzzword to indicate the primary text that a transmedia story is built around'.<sup>556</sup> The MCU's feature films act as motherships, sustaining a series of smaller orbiting texts which in turn direct audiences back toward the central text. In fact, Marvel's branding of the universe as the MCU, rather than the MTU, indicates that it privileges feature films.<sup>557</sup>

The hierarchies of texts and media detailed above, and some of their key governing principles, are visually denoted in a shot in MCU *Avengers* in which Tony/Iron Man views footage of Thor (Chris Hemsworth), Steve Rogers/Captain America (Chris Evans) and Bruce/Hulk (Edward Norton and Mark Ruffalo) simultaneously on separate holographic windows [Figure 93]. Different narrative strands and solo character series that comprise the MCU are literally contained in windows within *The Avengers'*

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<sup>556</sup> Suzanne Scott, 'Who's Steering the Mothership?: The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling' in Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (ed.), *The Participatory Cultures Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 46.

<sup>557</sup> This centrality is also evident in the fact that, as Proctor notes, the texts in media other than film are released to integrate with the films' release schedule with, for example, comic book 'preludes' becoming part of a new film's publicity campaign, or shorts plugging temporal gaps between films both within the diegesis and in regard to the release schedule (Proctor, 'Avengers Assembled', pp. 12-13). This strategy is also another way in which regular delivery of new content is maintained throughout each year. The seasons of television series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (ABC, 2013-) also perform this function, beginning in autumn, after the summer's cinematic releases, and having the end of each season overlapping with the first cinematic release of the following year, thus enabling it to engage with the film's narrative concerns. For example, the end of season one of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* corresponded with the release of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2014), and the television show depicted the ways in which the exposure of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s infiltration by HYDRA in the film impacted its characters.

frame. By placing these elements alongside one another, the shot also maps the temporal and spatial scope of the universe, connecting the dots from Captain America's excursions in World War II Europe to Thor's recent battles against Asgardian foes. It is significant that these windows only present characters and footage from feature films, thus situating film as the core component of the MCU. However, the shot does gesture towards other media: the juxtaposed windows recall juxtaposed panels in comics. This instance of remediation functions comparably to imagery in *Superman: The Movie* that evokes comics panels. The layering of these holographic windows at different distances within the space, and the presence of movement in their images, exhibit formal qualities not available to comics. This scene also suggests the capacity of contemporary film to offer audiences the same ability to scan visual information that detailed compositions in comics do, as discussed earlier. Laura Mulvey argues that digital viewing devices enable the stillness that has always been present in the individual film frame, and provides a secret counterpoint to movement in cinema, to be 'easily revealed at the touch of a button'.<sup>558</sup> By accessing and replaying these images on holographic screens that can be activated and reconfigured with hand gestures, Tony represents the MCU spectator who can view the films separately or partake in more synchronous or active viewing practices if accessing the films on digital formats such as DVDs. This scene ultimately suggests that, in the digital age, cinema grants viewers the mastery over temporal flow that comics readers enjoy.

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<sup>558</sup> Laura Mulvey. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2007), p. 22.

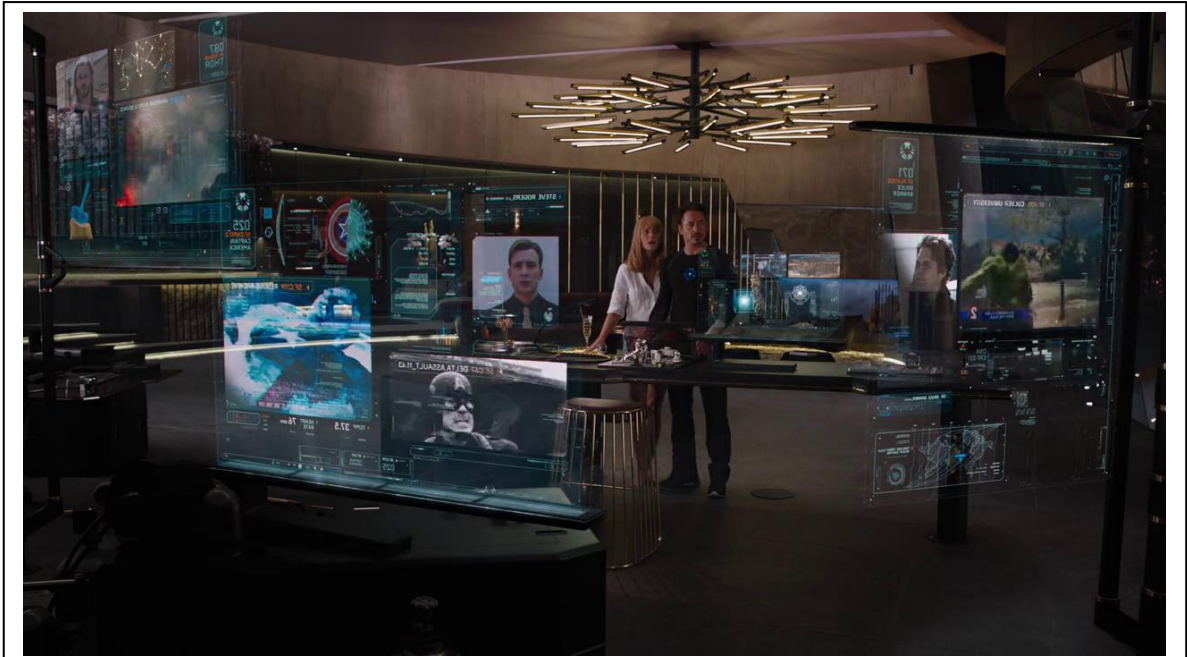


Figure 93 Tony views footage of Thor, Captain America and Hulk simultaneously on separate holographic windows in MCU Avengers

Matthias Stork argues that these holoscreens are emblematic of *The Avengers'* 'aesthetic of convergence', through which the film stylistically communicates the MCU's success in transposing the ideas that govern media convergence into Hollywood filmmaking strategy.<sup>559</sup> Stork analyses many of the same scenes from *The Avengers* that I do below, arguing that the presentation of the team articulates and promotes Marvel Studios' mode of industrial synergy. This focus on the industrial function of *The Avengers'* aesthetic can help illuminate ways in which its stylistic strategies contribute to the hierarchical organisation of texts and media. However, following the work undertaken in my thesis so far, full appreciation of the superhero blockbuster's aesthetics can only be achieved when the aesthetic is unbound from the industrial and examined on its own. It is therefore necessary for me to keep my analysis apart from discourses of media convergence which, having developed from the exploration of relations between industries and audiences in Jenkins' *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, are laden with issues of commerce.<sup>560</sup> The discourses of adaptation that

<sup>559</sup> Matthias Stork, 'Assembling the Avengers: Reframing the Superhero Movie through Marvel's Cinematic Universe' in James N. Gilmore and Matthias Stork (ed.), *Superhero Synergies: Comic Book Characters Go Digital* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p. 85.

<sup>560</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

underpin my project can illuminate textual and media hierarchies in converged media structures while also facilitating an appreciation of aesthetics that is not burdened by industrial concerns.

The efforts made to elevate the MCU above other universes in the Marvel multiverse call into question what kinds of connections the MCU retains with the multiverse. Martin Zeller-Jacques suggests that as superhero film series develop they 'arguably work to supplant their superheroic narrative "sources" by creating alternative metatexts of their own', and as such 'move beyond adaptation'.<sup>561</sup> For Zeller-Jacques, the more rigorously a superhero film series constructs its own universe, the more its expansive diegesis supplants the diegeses that were initially adapted. However, numerous features of the MCU suggest that dialogue with character matrices and the Marvel multiverse remains open as the cinematic universe develops. For example, discrete textual elements typically referred to as Easter eggs often gesture to the multiverse while signposting potential future events within the universe.<sup>562</sup> A dog in an astronaut suit who features briefly in three scenes of *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014) demonstrates these functions. Comic book fans may recognise this dog as Cosmo, a previous member of the eponymous team in Marvel's 616 universe, while Cosmo's presence in the MCU suggests the possibility of him joining the team in future films. Other ways of gesturing to the multiverse are paratextual materials and film titles announcing that films are adapting specific comic book stories, such as *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2014) being situated as an adaptation of the 616 storyline of the same name.<sup>563</sup> Regardless of how narratively faithful these films are to their identified sources, they interact with a network of texts in other universes. For example, Arnim Zola (Toby Jones), a villain from the 616 universe who does not feature in the specified adapted story, plays a key role in MCU *Winter Soldier*.

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<sup>561</sup> Martin Zeller-Jacques, 'Adapting the X-Men: Comic Book Narratives in Film Franchises' in Deborah Cartmell (ed.), *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012), p.144.

<sup>562</sup> For further discussion of Easter Eggs in the MCU, and other textual elements that function to connect the MCU films while also gesturing to the wider Marvel multiverse, see Aaron Calbreath-Frasieur, 'Iron Man: Building the Marvel Cinematic Universe', *Scope*, 26 (2014), pp. 25-31.

<sup>563</sup> This storyline is collected in Ed Brubaker (w), Steve Epting (a), Michael Lark (a), et al., *Captain America: Winter Soldier Ultimate Collection* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2010).

Clare Parody's assertion that franchise adaptations adapt not individual texts but fictional worlds provides a useful way to frame this process of gesturing to and combining elements from the Marvel multiverse, although it requires some expansion.<sup>564</sup> As superhero film universes develop from text to text, they continue to adapt not just a previously realised world, but multiple iterations of a universe. The particular relations between these different iterations need to be examined to determine whether this adaptive process has more complex functions than simply extracting selective elements and situating them in a new universe.

Analysing the intertextual strategies deployed by three different cinematic realisations of monstrous superhero Hulk – *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003), *The Incredible Hulk* and *The Avengers* – can illuminate relations between different versions of characters and universes. *Hulk* (2003) met with lukewarm critical and box office success.<sup>565</sup> Since a common fan reproach is that director Ang Lee imposed his arthouse sensibilities too strongly on the film, while its champions celebrate Lee's unique approach, I will refer to it as Lee's *Hulk*.<sup>566</sup> Reacting to this reception, Marvel chose Louis Leterrier, a director with far less auteurist clout, to helm the 2008 MCU *The Incredible Hulk*. Leterrier's film only marginally improved on the previous film's success, and made less than half the box office of 2008's other MCU release, *Iron Man*.<sup>567</sup> Bruce/Hulk was subsequently conspicuously absent from the MCU until, in 2012, *The Avengers* introduced a revamped version of the character. Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone discuss this process of reforming Hulk's cinematic incarnation as threatening to 'produce confusion and contradiction within a character's collectively accepted persona/brand'.<sup>568</sup> The three distinct screen

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<sup>564</sup> Clare Parody, 'Franchising/Adaptation', *Adaptation*, 4:2 (2011), p. 214.

<sup>565</sup> *Box Office Mojo* lists *Hulk*'s production budget as \$137 million and worldwide gross as \$245,360,480. Aggregate review site *Rotten Tomatoes* gives the film a 61% critical rating. *Rotten Tomatoes*, <<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/>>, accessed on 22 January 2015.

<sup>566</sup> For example, Matt Yockey frames his argument for the film's success in its 'blending of art cinema psychological gravitas and superhero melodrama' as a corrective response to the common criticisms. Matt Yockey, 'Secret Origins: melodrama and the Digital in Ang Lee's *Hulk*', in Gilmore and Stork (ed.), *Superhero Synergies*, p. 27.

<sup>567</sup> *Box Office Mojo* lists *The Incredible Hulk*'s production budget as \$150 million and worldwide gross as \$263,427,551, in comparison to *Iron Man*'s \$585,174,222. *Rotten Tomatoes* gives the film a 67% critical rating.

<sup>568</sup> Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, p. 26.

versions of Bruce/Hulk, released within a period of ten years, provide sites of potential rupture not just within the *Hulk* matrix, but also the MCU.

The opening titles for Lee's *Hulk* deploy motifs from *Hulk* comic books and contemporary superhero blockbusters to establish key points in its intertextual framework. As the initial credits are displayed the view speeds and swerves through digital renderings of biological cells [Figure 94]. Much of this imagery is bathed



Figure 94 Biological cells bathed in green from the opening of Lee's *Hulk*

in the bright green hues of Hulk's iconic skin colour, which is bound to his comic book roots through also being the colour in which the title font, designed to recall the style of handwritten words associated strongly with Golden and Silver Age comics, is presented. Meanwhile, the kaleidoscopic motion and abstraction follows in the cinematic superhero tradition of *Superman: The Movie* and Raimi's *Spider-Man*. The cellular imagery recalls that of the opening sequence of television series *The Incredible Hulk* (CBS, 1978-1982), but the kaleidoscopic motion more explicitly emulates the rush through digitally rendered cellular material at the opening of 2000's *X-Men*, and many of its sequels.<sup>569</sup> As the opening sequence segues into images of genetic experimentation the film's unique spin on Hulk's origin is inserted into its intertextual framework. It will subsequently be revealed that the man experimenting on animals in hope of achieving cellular regeneration is Bruce/Hulk's (Eric Bana) father, David Banner (Nick Nolte). Hulk's comic book origin, in which scientist Bruce is caught in the blast of a gamma bomb of his own creation, causing an alteration to his biological structure that prompts

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<sup>569</sup> The score that accompanies this sequence is composed by Danny Elfman, who has previously provided scores for other screen superhero adaptations, some of the most prominent being Burton's *Batman* and Raimi's *Spider-Man*. Elfman's association with the musical texture of superhero films is outlined in an exchange in *Kick-Ass #5* when, upon first teaming up, Red Mist and Kick-Ass bond over a mutual love for Elfman, who they listen to as they go to search for crimes together. Elfman subsequently wrote a track for the *Kick-Ass* film adaptation (Matthew Vaughn, 2010). The Elfman score for Lee's *Hulk* can therefore be considered another element of intertextuality with contemporary superhero cinema. Mark Millar (w), John Romita Jr. (p), Tom Palmer (i), et al., *Kick-Ass #5* (New York: Marvel Comics, February 2009)

transformations into a green monster, is thus modified to be initiated by David's experimentation on his son. The origin is not entirely rewritten, since Bruce's altered genealogy is mutated into one that causes his transformations after a laboratory accident involving gamma radiation, thus reintroducing gamma into the equation, while the lab accident scenario draws on Hulk's origin from the 1978 television series.<sup>570</sup> The film sustains this interaction between its chosen points on the *Hulk* matrix, contemporary superhero cinema and its own narrative amendments throughout.<sup>571</sup>

MCU *Incredible Hulk* performs what is commonly termed a 'reboot'. Proctor has undertaken the most rigorous work in defining, and analysing the process of, media reboots. The term comes from restarting a computer in attempt to restore functionality after an error has occurred, and in media is applied to a practice particularly prominent throughout the history of DC comics in which a universe is restarted, nullifying diegetic history and beginning again from 'year one'.<sup>572</sup> While the concept is comparable to a remake in that it describes a rearticulation of a familiar narrative, it exclusively pertains to serialised fiction, since a new continuity intended to comprise many texts is initiated.<sup>573</sup> This process of rearticulating content from previous texts causes Proctor to discuss rebooting as a 'method of adaptation', albeit one that happens within a single medium.<sup>574</sup> MCU *Incredible Hulk* is also an adaptation in the more widely accepted sense of adapting material between media. The determining factor that constitutes the film not just as a new adaptation, but also a reboot, is that it is an adaptation

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<sup>570</sup> There are also many Easter eggs in Lee's *Hulk* that gesture to the 1978 television series, such as Bruce's father being called David, which is what Bruce was renamed as for the series. For a summary of the key links and Easter eggs, see Yockey, 'Secret Origins', p. 29.

<sup>571</sup> For example, its much-discussed split-screen editing and vivid palette remediate comics form, locations such as the desert army base recreate core settings from 1960s *Hulk* comic books, images of a digitally rendered Hulk bounding through this landscape situate him alongside cinematic superheroes of the era, while father/son antagonism with increasingly Oedipal connotations becomes the central narrative thread.

<sup>572</sup> William Proctor, 'Beginning Again: The Reboot Phenomenon in Comic Books and Film', *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture*, 9:1 (2012). A key difference between reboots in comics and film is that in the former they are typically diegetically rationalised, the archetypal example being *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, while films generally do not provide such rationales. Proctor provides the cinematic reboot *Star Trek* (J.J. Abrams, 2009) as an exception to this rule. Another exception is *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014), which initiates a new timeline separate to that in which the preceding *X-Men* films are situated.

<sup>573</sup> William Proctor, 'Regeneration & Rebirth: Anatomy of the Franchise Reboot', *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 22 (2012), pp. 3-4.

<sup>574</sup> Proctor, 'Beginning Again'.

in a medium in which there has already been a *Hulk* adaptation, which this new incarnation seeks to negate. Proctor acknowledges that, as in the process of adaptation I have observed, reboots reconnect with a matrix of content. However, he tends to frame this relation in antagonistic terms, for instance stating that ‘a text can never achieve complete autonomy from its vast and expansive genealogy, thus creating a paradoxical form: a product that seeks to begin at an origin nexus yet is in constant conflict with its textual ancestry and cultural memory’.<sup>575</sup> Despite noting how *Batman Begins* maintains dialogue with previous incarnations, Proctor emphasises a sense of conflict and, like Brooker, focuses on how, even when a new text attempts to eradicate a prior “bad” incarnation, said incarnation cannot be erased from cultural memory.<sup>576</sup>

Rearranging the *Hulk* matrix in terms of centrality and marginality is a key strategy through which MCU *Incredible Hulk* disavows Lee’s *Hulk*. As with Lee’s *Hulk*, *The Incredible Hulk*’s intertextual framework is mapped in its opening title sequence. The accident that instigates Bruce’s transformations recreates narrative elements and visual motifs from the opening sequence of the 1978 television series; chiefly, the apparatus in which Bruce sits for a disastrous laboratory experiment [Figure 95 and Figure 96], a red warning light stressing the word “DANGER” [Figure 97 and Figure 98] and x-rays of human skulls [Figure 99 and Figure 100].<sup>577</sup> Recreating motifs that recur in the opening of every episode of the 1978 television series establishes the intertextual link by situating the film within this chain of repetition. The film later reveals that the experiment was part of a project attempting to replicate the serum that granted Captain America his powers, which is the context for Hulk’s origin in Marvel’s Ultimate universe. This revelation also foreshadows MCU *Captain America*, thereby simultaneously situating this new incarnation of Hulk in a universe with other superheroes, specifically the MCU. Easter eggs in the opening credits also situate the film in the MCU. After the experiment, Bruce/Hulk’s proceeding

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<sup>575</sup> Proctor, ‘Regeneration & Rebirth’, p. 12.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>577</sup> In the television series the red light is initially framed so that only ‘ANGER’ can be read, thus linking the word that provides a physical warning of the initial accident to the emotion that manifests itself physically in, and triggers, the scientist’s transformations into Hulk. This single image thus encapsulates the exchanges between the conceptual and perceptual qualities of words and images that have been demonstrated throughout my thesis.



life on the run is narrated through newspaper clippings and military documents. The latter include names familiar from the MCU's *Iron Man*, such as Stark Industries, Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) and S.H.I.E.L.D.<sup>578</sup> The densely textured opening sequence of *The Incredible Hulk* therefore draws the 1978 television series and Ultimate Universe incarnation of Hulk to the centre of the *Hulk* matrix, while situating its new incarnation in the MCU continuity. Through foregrounding these intertexts while ignoring Lee's *Hulk*, the previous film is pushed to the periphery of the *Hulk* matrix.

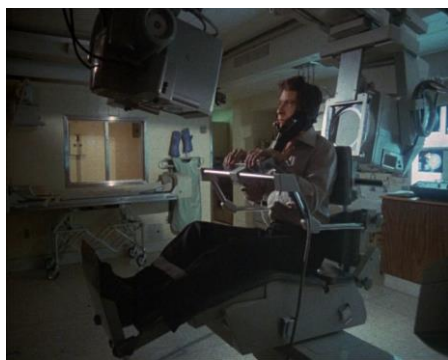


Figure 95 Laboratory apparatus from the opening of the 1978 *Incredible Hulk* television series



Figure 96 Laboratory apparatus from the opening of MCU *Incredible Hulk*



Figure 97 "DANGER" warning from the opening of the 1978 *Incredible Hulk* television series



Figure 98 "DANGER" warning from the opening of MCU *Incredible Hulk*

<sup>578</sup> References to other points on the *Hulk* matrix are also embedded in these documents. For example, Richard "Rick" Jones is listed as a known associate. In the 616 universe Bruce is initially caught in the gamma explosion when saving Rick, who has driven onto the bomb's test site. Rick subsequently becomes Bruce's friend, aiding him in attempts to evade the military and contain Hulk. Although Rick is yet to be seen in the MCU, the inclusion of his name in these documents enables fans to infer his actions and personality based on their knowledge of him from the *Hulk* matrix.

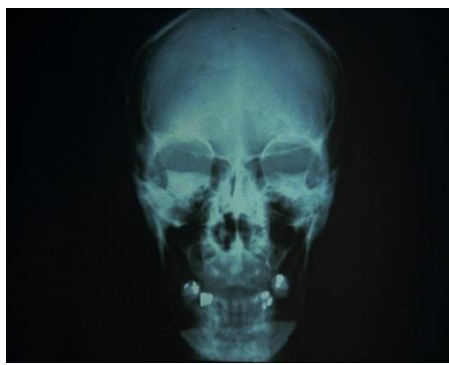


Figure 99 Skull x-ray from the opening of the 1978 *Incredible Hulk* television series



Figure 100 Skull x-ray from the opening of MCU *Incredible Hulk*

Narrative departures and tonal shifts are other key strategies through which MCU *Incredible Hulk* seeks to negate Lee's *Hulk*. Reintroducing the scenario of Bruce experimenting on himself erases the familial drama of Lee's film, in which Bruce's father David provides the biological and traumatic basis for Bruce's transformations by purposely infecting him with gamma radiation and killing his mother. A change in generic framework complements this shift from a contorted Oedipal narrative to one of scientific experimentation gone wrong. Bruce/Hulk's debut in *The Incredible Hulk* #1 draws on a network of supernatural lore and gothic literature that includes werewolves, gargoyles and *Jekyll and Hyde*. While Lee's *Hulk* incorporates elements of horror – for example, David intersects with the horror archetype of the ingenious but abhorrent scientist, as exemplified by Dr. Frankenstein – Matt Yockey explains that the film primarily hybridises melodrama with superhero conventions.<sup>579</sup> Meanwhile, MCU *Incredible Hulk* brings horror to the foreground, calling specifically on the genre's cinematic tropes. For example, the opening utilises the horror trope in which the audience sees through the typically male killer's eyes, but are not invited to identify with him, when the bloody violence Hulk's initial rampage inflicts on Betty Ross (Liv Tyler) and General Ross is shown from Hulk's point of view [Figure 101].<sup>580</sup>

<sup>579</sup> Yockey, 'Secret Origins', pp. 31-32.

<sup>580</sup> For an influential discussion of this trope in relation to identification and gender see Carol J. Clover, *Men, Woman and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: University Press, 1992), pp. 45-46. Deployment of horror tropes continues throughout *The Incredible Hulk*. For example, Banner's first transformation after the opening credits plays out like a sequence from a horror film in which the monstrous unknown is largely consigned to shadows, and we only see glimpses as Hulk snatches his assailants into the darkness one by one. The transformation itself is seen only in part, through the night vision sight of a soldier's rifle, the abstraction caused by this mediated view of the event further enforcing the sense of Hulk as monstrous

The dark palette and ominous orchestral score in the opening of MCU *Incredible Hulk*, elements that pervade the whole film, augment the horror framework. They also create a sombre tone that seeks to present a greater sense of realism than the vibrant aesthetic of Lee's film. The assertion of greater realism than textual predecessors is a key trait that Proctor identifies in what he considers a currently ongoing 'reboot cycle of franchise films'.<sup>581</sup> Elsewhere, recasting Bruce as Edward Norton, who is inserted into the newly arranged matrix throughout the opening sequence, grants the character a particular kind of "realistic" psychology that intends to be more subdued and contemporarily resonant than the twisted Freudian trauma in Lee's film. The new incarnation of Bruce/Hulk is infused with the connotations Norton carries from films such as *American History X* (Tony Kaye, 1998) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) of the modern masculine psyche in crisis.



Figure 101 Hulk's initial rampage presented from his point of view in MCU *Incredible Hulk*

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unknown. An example of this same strategy being used in a horror film occurs in *The Descent* (Neil Marshall, 2005), when one of the monsters is first seen up close through the night vision mode of a character's digital video camera.

<sup>581</sup> Proctor, 'Regeneration & Rebirth', p. 3. Proctor sees *Batman Begins* as initiating this cycle.

MCU *Incredible Hulk's* opening also features images of biological cells awash in green [Figure 102]. Reinstating this motif from Lee's *Hulk* places both films in the same genealogy in a very literal way, emphasising that they share the same textual matrix. Thus, despite the



strategies undertaken to push MCU *Incredible Hulk* to the centre of the *Hulk* matrix and Lee's *Hulk* to the margins, intersections still emerge between the films. It is significant that MCU *Incredible Hulk* does not offer the exploration of the protagonist's origin that Proctor sees as central to the reboot form.<sup>582</sup> The film compresses elements that it keeps from Lee's over two-hour origin story and other previous incarnations into the under three-minute opening sequence.<sup>583</sup> Elements from Lee's film that are economically reestablished in this sequence include characters Bruce, Betty and General Ross, and certain components of Hulk's origin (gamma radiation, scientific experimentation, etc.). Following this compressed opening that relies on audience familiarity with prior *Hulk* texts, the film's main narrative starts *in medias res*, or from 'year two'.<sup>584</sup> Bruce begins 'year two' working in a Brazilian soft drink factory, recalling the way episodes of the 1978 television series typically begin with the protagonist undertaking unskilled work to remain inconspicuous. This point of familiarity further stabilises the abrupt start, while emulation of the series' formula and motifs maintain stability throughout the

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<sup>582</sup> Proctor, 'Regeneration & Rebirth', p. 5.

<sup>583</sup> Elision or severe compression of a superhero's origin due to assumed cultural knowledge is something that often occurs in the genre. For example, Burton's *Batman* opens with a couple and their child being mugged, prompting the audience to assume they are witnessing Batman's origin, only for it to be revealed that this is not Bruce Wayne's (Michael Keaton) family when Batman apprehends the criminals. This sequence is designed to activate cultural memory of Batman's origin, while playfully acknowledging that the film does not need to show the actual event for audiences to make sense of the diegesis. The origin is shown later of the film in flashback when the specific way in which the film rewrites the origin to position Jack Napier/Joker (Jack Nicholson) as the murderer of Bruce Wayne's parents is outlined.

<sup>584</sup> In fact, this 'year two' designation very neatly aligns with the diegetic timeframe that can be pieced together from dates on the documents in the opening sequence. The earliest date provided here is 07 February 2006, on which Bruce tried to make contact with Betty. The final military communication in the sequence states that Bruce/Hulk has not been seen for five months, with the last recorded sighting on 26 October 2006. This timeline suggests that the earliest start date for the film's narrative is March 2007, over one year after the event that triggered Bruce's first transformation, thus during 'year two' of his life as Bruce/Hulk.

film.<sup>585</sup> However, whereas the series has a largely episodic structure, with the protagonist exhibiting very little development, MCU *Incredible Hulk* depicts an arc for Bruce that continues aspects of Lee's film. Situating Bruce in Brazil also picks up where Lee's film ended, with Bruce hiding from the military outside of the U.S. The film builds on the suggestion at the end of Lee's *Hulk* that Bruce is learning to wield Hulk's powers, evidenced when he threatens a mercenary with his famous worded identifier from the television series – “don't make me angry; you wouldn't like me when I'm angry” – and his eyes glow green.<sup>586</sup> Key points in this arc's development in *The Incredible Hulk* are Bruce's confidence in being able to “aim” Hulk during the climactic battle, and the indication in his final scene that he is capable of controlling the transformation as, while meditating, his eyes turn green (recalling Lee's film) and he smiles at the audience. *The Incredible Hulk* therefore does not completely erase Lee's *Hulk*, but rather harnesses cultural memory of it to enable the compression and subsequent development of familiar narrative elements.

MCU *Avengers* alters Bruce/Hulk again through a process of reconfiguring and compressing elements from the *Hulk* matrix. Bruce is introduced in Calcutta, maintaining from both previous films the notion of him finding sanctuary outside of the U.S., while his job as medical doctor more closely aligns with the end of Lee's *Hulk*. He is first seen looking in a mirror, a motif for symbolising duality and transformation used at key points in Lee's film<sup>587</sup>, that here also connotes the transformation of the actor portraying him from Norton to Mark Ruffalo.<sup>588</sup> This shot therefore compresses Bruce/Hulk's

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<sup>585</sup> For example, after military discovery and a Hulk transformation propel Bruce out of Brazil, the series' title theme plays as he wanders alone in torn clothes, motifs which in the series indicated a loss of Bruce's temporary sanctuary.

<sup>586</sup> The film's specific rearticulation of this worded identifier is evident in the fact it is said in Spanish. MCU *Incredible Hulk* offers its own (mis)articulation when Bruce says, in Portuguese, “don't make my hungry; you wouldn't like me when I'm hungry”, while MCU *Avengers* metamorphoses it into “I'm always angry”. That each film rearticulates this worded identifier in their own unique way is emblematic of the fact that they each offer distinct reconfigurations of a shared matrix.

<sup>587</sup> In a dream sequence in which Bruce sees Hulk on the other side of a mirror, when Hulk reverts back to Bruce while looking at his reflection in a lake, and in the climactic fight when Hulk again looks in the water, this time to have his father emerge.

<sup>588</sup> A comparable moment that resonates diegetically while simultaneously offering an extra-diegetic acknowledgement that the actor playing a character has changed occurs in *Iron Man 2*. When Don Cheadle is first seen as Jim Rhodes, who was played by Terrence Howard in the first film, he says to Tony “look it's me, I'm here, deal with it, let's move on”. While diegetically he is telling Tony to accept that he is being called to give

inherent duality into a single image that is loaded with meaning from a previous text, significantly Lee's film rather than MCU *Incredible Hulk*. If promotional material has not already made audiences aware that Ruffalo has taken the role of Bruce/Hulk, the use of location and motifs establishes this before it is confirmed in dialogue. The specific modifications Ruffalo's performance makes to Bruce are evident from his first conversation with Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson). He offers wry jokes and smiles, but also exudes affability, accentuated by his somewhat scruffy, loose-fitting wardrobe, which simultaneously gestures to his alter-ego's great stature. Ruffalo's performance of comedy and charm works to distance his Bruce from Norton's more sombre incarnation.

Despite foregrounding divergences from MCU *Incredible Hulk*, *The Avengers* seeks to maintain narrative continuity and thus its status as part of the character reboot. The shift from Norton's more despondent Bruce is diegetically rationalised when Bruce reveals that he attempted suicide, was thwarted by Hulk and subsequently dedicated himself to helping people. This revelation also explains what the character has been doing in the universe during his textual absence.<sup>589</sup> While filling out details of Bruce/Hulk's existence in the years intervening his screen appearances, *The Avengers* does not negate any narrative elements of *The Incredible Hulk*. Some are referenced, such as Bruce mentioning that last time he was in New York he "broke Harlem". Others, such as General Ross, Betty and the open narrative thread of Samuel Sterns' (Tim Blake Nelson) mutation, are not contradicted.<sup>590</sup> Meanwhile, Bruce's arc of gaining control over Hulk continues, as evidenced by Bruce's enhanced ability to control his transformations, the suggestion that he aims Hulk's fall from the helicarrier to avoid landing in an inhabited environment, and Hulk's adoption of the role of superhero in the final act. Thus, *The Avengers* maintains the continuity established in *The Incredible Hulk* by diegetically rationalising

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evidence at Tony's Senate hearing, extra-diegetically this line tells audiences to "deal with" the change in actor and "move on" so that the inconsistency can be smoothed over.

<sup>589</sup> Another example of how the film functions to re-integrate Bruce/Hulk into the MCU occurs when Natasha informs him that agency S.H.I.E.L.D. have been keeping track of his movements, suggesting that the character never left, and has in fact been part of the omnipresent S.H.I.E.L.D.'s off-screen endeavours.

<sup>590</sup> In 616 continuity, Samuel Sterns' alter-ego is supervillain Leader.

changes in character, ensuring narrative ruptures do not occur and developing Bruce/Hulk's ongoing arc.

While the MCU constructs a multi-series networked diegesis that is presented as hierarchically superior to other versions of the Marvel universe, it does not supplant these. Rather than becoming its own self-sustaining universe, the MCU continues to interact with a network of other versions of the universe. In the case of Bruce/Hulk, MCU *Incredible Hulk* and *Avengers* foreground their intertextual strategies in attempt to ensure that, like the character's diegetic transformation, Bruce/Hulk's cinematic development enacts not simply dislocations of identity, but metamorphosis between states. The vast Marvel multiverse, rather than providing unnecessary baggage that the MCU needs to discard, can be organised into intertextual frameworks that enable the compression of narrative information and provide tools with which to manage and stabilise the cinematic network.

### Mapping the Team

Besides textual matrices and universes, another site of ongoing expansion in superhero narratives are superheroes themselves. Throughout this thesis I have used the model of a spectrum to map the pluralities of individual superheroes. A specific incarnation's position on their spectrum is determined by tensions and exchanges within either a dual or tripartite identity formed of superhero, civilian and, in media such as radio and film, actor. It is important to note that MCU characters tend to not uphold a clear division between superhero and civilian identities, disregarding the secret identity trope by having both sides of their identities known to the public.<sup>591</sup> However, in their solo films the fraught tensions between roles that typify the superhero archetype that Marvel pioneered in the 1960s manifest in different ways. For example, Tony/Iron Man struggles to reconcile his roles of weapons manufacturer and peace-seeking superhero. Meanwhile Thor, who does not have a civilian identity,

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<sup>591</sup> Matt Murdock/Daredevil (Charlie Cox) is the first superhero in the MCU to maintain a secret identity, on television series *Daredevil* (Netflix, 2015- ). Peter Parker/Spider-Man (Tom Holland) is the first superhero to maintain a secret identity in an MCU film. Introduced in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), the thirteenth MCU film, Peter's first scene concerns the young superhero being recruited by Tony, who tracks Peter down from footage of Spider-Man published online. The means Tony uses to uncover Peter's secret suggest the impracticality and implausibility of maintaining a secret identity in a world replete with media and surveillance technologies.

has his machismo tempered when his powers are revoked and he learns to connect with non-superpowered humans on Earth.<sup>592</sup> In MCU *Avengers*, each team member therefore potentially has a vast spectrum that, when placed alongside one another, create a great multiplicity of roles. My previous chapters have demonstrated that the representation of spaces and bodies play a key role in mapping character spectrums. Looking at how these elements are presented in *The Avengers* promises to reveal how the film manages the team's multiplicities.

### *Characterised Spaces*

*Superman: The Movie* and Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy both feature an array of spaces in which different genre conventions and elements of style coded to distinct eras are deployed. In *Superman: The Movie* these present different areas of a universe and represent different aspects of the eponymous superhero, while in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films, all of the spaces are in New York and represent the different roles that Peter/Spider-Man can pursue in this urban environment. Different spaces and genre conventions are used in comparable ways in individual MCU films to map a character's spectrum. For example, the grandeur of Asgard's interiors in the ceremony that begins *Thor* complements the eponymous superhero's initial egotism. Once he is banished to Earth, the more constricting and humble interiors of the small town in New Mexico facilitate fish-out-of-water comedy that teases out Thor's humility. The MCU's array of spaces and genre codes maps the universe and different characters' roles not just within films and series, but also between series set in diverse environments.

Mark J. P. Wolf's conceptualisation of different kinds of imaginary world provides a useful framework through which to examine the diversity of environments within the MCU. Wolf uses J. R. R. Tolkien's distinction of the Primary World ('the material, intersubjective world in which we live') and secondary worlds ('the imaginary worlds created by authors'), and argues that in fiction, 'rather than having a strict delineation between Primary and secondary worlds, we have something of a spectrum

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<sup>592</sup> In 616 continuity Thor initially had the civilian identity of Donald Blake, a medical Doctor whose lame leg provided a physical impediment that counterpointed Thor's strength and ability.



connecting them'.<sup>593</sup> He positions the version of New York that Spider-Man inhabits in Marvel comics somewhere at the centre of this, in which 'fictional elements are overlaid onto a real location, but without separating a secondary world from the Primary World'.<sup>594</sup> Wolf calls this an 'overlaid world'.<sup>595</sup> The films in the MCU occupy different points on Wolf's spectrum of worlds, yet each adds new elements to the shared universe. The MCU starts as an overlaid world, particularly rooting itself in the contemporary context of the "War on Terror" in *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Iron Man 2*.<sup>596</sup> *Thor* then introduces Asgard, an imaginary world at the far end of the spectrum, while subsequent films, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy*, continue the intergalactic expansion of the universe.<sup>597</sup>

The placement of an MCU environment on Wolf's spectrum of worlds is interlinked with the generic frameworks deployed by the film(s) in which it features. For example, the overlaid Primary World spaces of 1940s New York and Europe in *Captain America* are suited to and motivate war film conventions with elements of science fiction. Environments that exhibit higher degrees of fictionalisation feature in films that foreground more fantastically-oriented genres. *Guardians of the Galaxy* features alien planets within a generic framework that favours science-fiction conventions, particularly those of the space opera subgenre. At a similarly fictionalised, but distinct, place on Wolf's spectrum of worlds, *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016) introduces alternate dimensions governed by mystical lore to the MCU, and operates within a framework in which magical fantasy is a prominent element.

Of course, each film also deploys superhero conventions. Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone note that the MCU's genre hybridity is a continuation of strategies deployed in the 616 comic book

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<sup>593</sup> Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012). First two quotes from p. 23, third from p. 27.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>596</sup> For discussions of how these films are rooted in the context of the "War on Terror" see Spanakos, 'Exceptional Recognition'; and Pheasant-Kelley, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, pp. 143-159.

<sup>597</sup> This progression parallels that growth of Marvel's 616 comic book universe. For a discussion of the 616 universe's expansion from the streets of New York to outer space and other dimensions, see Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, pp. 7-8.

universe.<sup>598</sup> As discussed in my review of literature, hybridising superhero conventions with those of other genres in comic books is a popular strategy for offering variation within the superhero genre. Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone formulate the notion of a 'genre fractal' to conceptualise the relation between other genres and superhero conventions in the MCU.<sup>599</sup> For Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, a fractal version (which they define as 'a miniaturized replica, a repeat of the pattern in a scaled-down form') of another genre is situated within the action/adventure frameworks of each MCU film.<sup>600</sup> The MCU films are interlocked through shared superhero conventions, but within this umbrella each is differentiated by the genre fractals they contain. This fractal model is useful for conceptualising how the MCU cultivates a universe that is at once varied and cohesive, each film having its own identity within a unifying structure.

While each film in the MCU features a range of spaces that can represent different points on a character's spectrum, each film also operates within a generic framework that differentiates it from others in the MCU. The configuration of genre conventions can shift from film to film in a series, but a series' distinct identity is retained through the settings and genre conventions of each film occupying a similar point on Wolf's spectrum of worlds. For example, *Captain America* sequel *The Winter Soldier* changes war film conventions for those of the political thriller, retaining science fiction elements. While the era also changes from the 1940s to the twenty-first century, the new generic framework favours similar environments and narrative concerns to those in the first film. *Winter Soldier* explores its political conspiracy in overlaid Primary World locations, namely U.S. cities, and develops themes of international conflict in a narrative of international infiltration.

Each series in the MCU therefore maintains, if not a fixed generic framework, a certain kind of environment and range of thematic concerns. This strategy creates an identifiable set of associations for characters who belong to a particular series, what I will call their associative framework. A

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<sup>598</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

character's associative framework is informed by the kinds of space they occupy on Wolf's spectrum of worlds, and the genre conventions deployed in their series; two elements that reciprocally shape each other. For instance, Tony/Iron Man inhabits corporate spaces and sites of twenty-first century warfare that are overlaid with technologies that lean into the realm of science fiction, while Thor lives on an Asgard modelled on Norse mythology and is imbued with magical powers rooted in fantasy conventions. Following Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone's discussion of genre fractals, these different associative frameworks are linked by shared superhero conventions. However, Wolf's placement of different kinds of world in relation to one another on a spectrum suggests that links can also be traced from one world element to another, since these exist on a shared continuum. Rather than characters' discrete associative frameworks only being connected by a shared encompassing umbrella, the associative frameworks themselves also interlace. These links can be underscored textually. For example, in one scene in *Thor*, Agent Sitwell wonders if the metallic Asgardian adversary called a Destroyer is one of Tony's suits of Iron Man armour, thus outlining a link between the technologies of the *Iron Man* series and mythological beings in the *Thor* series. This moment exemplifies *Thor's* endeavours to interlink its fantastical universe additions with the preceding MCU films by thematising the permeability of science and magic. While, as observed in my first chapter, *Superman: The Movie* exploits points of exchange between genres to illuminate the compatibility of Clark/Superman's different traits, the MCU therefore harnesses points of intersection between characters' associative frameworks to draw together its universe.

Superhero team narratives that assemble characters from various series have the task of consolidating the associative frameworks of each series that are being drawn together. In comics, *The Avengers* #1 introduces each character in their home environment, as familiar from the series in which they originated – Donald Blake/Thor at his medical clinic, Bruce/Hulk in a southwestern desert, Janet van Dyne/Wasp and Henry "Hank" Pym/Ant-Man in what appears to be a laboratory and Tony/Iron Man in what we assume to be either his mansion or business offices – before bringing them together in spaces that include a circus big top and factory. The comic book thus introduces each character in a

familiar environment before bringing them together in spaces with which none of them are associated. Subsequent issues continue to exhibit a lack of spatial fixity, with the team's adventures staged either in an environment associated with certain characters – such as Tony/Iron Man's industrial New York, or Bruce/Hulk's southwestern deserts – or other environments altogether. For example, in *The Avengers #3*, the team battle Namor in Gibraltar. Like many Marvel heroes, in the Silver Age the team are, however, anchored in New York through adopting Tony's New York Mansion as their headquarters.

MCU *Avengers* follows a comparable trajectory, introducing each character in their own space before drawing them together in more neutral environments and eventually having them inhabit New York. However, it is interesting that the characters' "home" environments at the beginning of the film are not actually exact locations with which they have been associated in the MCU series to which they belong. As discussed earlier, Bruce/Hulk is introduced in Calcutta; a space that, although not featuring in MCU *Incredible Hulk*, is in keeping with similar spaces he has inhabited to elude the U.S. military in previous cinematic incarnations. We first see Steve/Captain America in a dilapidated boxing gym, evoking his military background in a bygone era.<sup>601</sup> Tony/Iron Man is in Manhattan connecting the energy source for his new skyscraper, enforcing the character's corporate and technological framework. Thor later emerges from a thunderstorm that connotes his powers and mythic roots. Rather than situating these characters in a specific space from a previous film, what is familiar about these environments is that they connote the characters' associative frameworks.

Various strategies are undertaken to compress characters' associative frameworks into their introductory scenes. The opening shot of Steve/Captain America's gym is a close-up on a pair of boxing gloves, which initially conceal Steve, while the space in the background is out of focus [Figure 103]. The offensive and defensive functions of this object connote another object: Captain America's shield,

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<sup>601</sup> It should be noted that a version of this scene is shown in a post-credit scene at the end of MCU *Captain America*, preceding a series of clips from *The Avengers* that are effectively edited into a trailer. Unlike other characters' "home" spaces at the beginning of *The Avengers*, this space therefore has previously been seen in an MCU film, although not in the main body of the film, and is presented as a preview for *The Avengers*.

which he both hurls at enemies and uses to deflect oncoming attacks. Furthermore, having this old pair of gloves hang, unused, evokes Steve's feeling of obsolescence in the twenty-first century.<sup>602</sup> Like the neglected gloves, the kind of warfare with which he is associated, and the values of camaraderie he cherishes, have seemingly become outmoded. The proceeding shots intercut flashbacks to his wartime experiences in MCU *Captain America* with shots of him, alone, rapidly pounding a punching bag. Close-ups on his face show the emotional strain of his past experiences and his sense of being lost in a present to which he does not belong, while shots of his fists hitting the bag, arm muscles bulging, demonstrate his power and need for a purpose toward which he can direct both mind and body. Similarly to the opening of MCU *Incredible Hulk*, this scene economically establishes its character through compressing elements with which the audience is assumed to be familiar. However, whereas *The Incredible Hulk* disseminated its reference points across a range of motifs, stylistic strategies and Easter eggs, Steve/Captain America's introduction in *The Avengers* is far more selective about what it imbues with relevance. The space itself is evocative, but much information pertaining to Steve's powers, military background and present state of mind is compressed into an individual piece of mise-en-scène and Steve's body itself.

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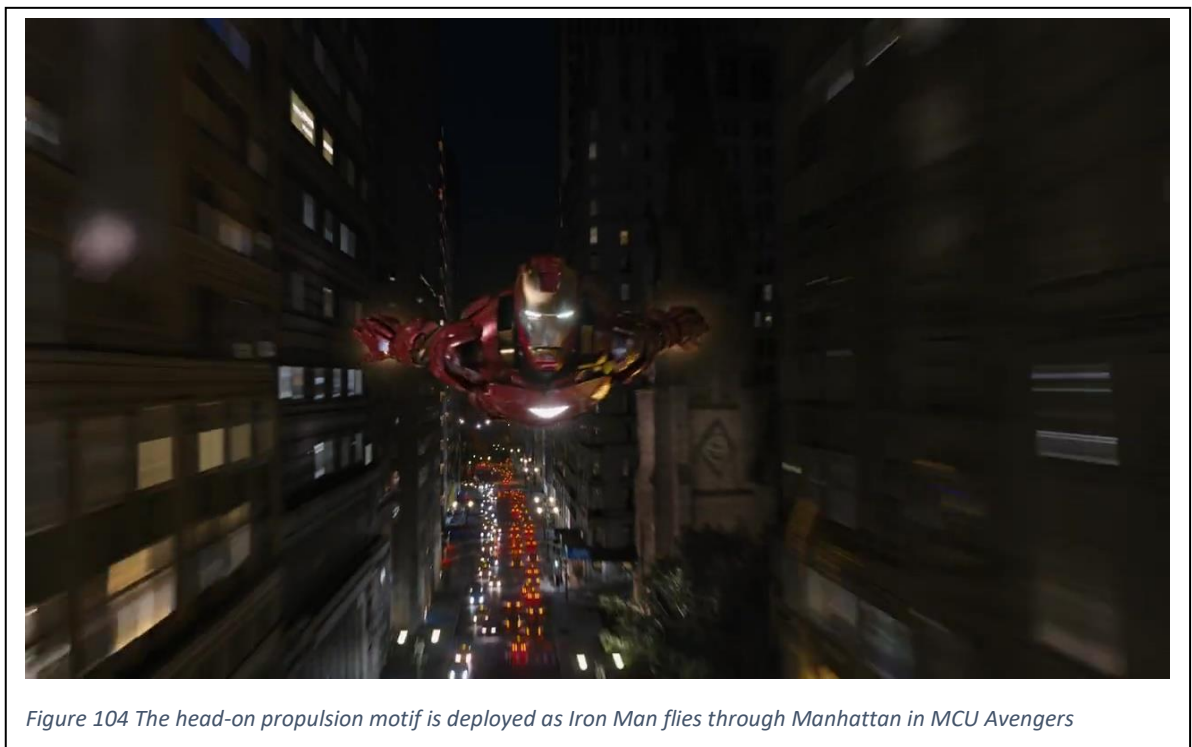
<sup>602</sup> Presenting the gloves still hanging also suggests that Steve does not need them to protect his super-human fists whilst training.



Figure 103 An image of boxing gloves introduces Rogers/Captain America in MCU *Avengers*

Similar strategies are evident in Tony/Iron Man's introduction. While, in Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy, Spider-Man's bond with New York is expressed through tactile interactions as he swings off flagpoles and crawls along skyscrapers, Iron Man soars above Manhattan's streets without ever touching the skyscrapers around him. Tony/Iron Man is associated with the capitalist mentality that the skyscrapers represent, rather than being bonded with the city itself. The familiar element is not the interaction between body and space, but the specific nature of the body's movements. Iron Man flies with legs streamlined and arms by his side, palms open and pointing toward his feet, so that the repulsor beams from his feet and hands fire in the same direction to propel him along. This pose and the smooth manner of propulsion feature heavily in the two *Iron Man* films released prior to *The Avengers*. Thus, while Iron Man's flights through Manhattan recall the head-on propulsion motif from *Superman: The Movie* by being mostly staged either directly toward [Figure 104] or away from the camera, the focus is altered. Rather than expressing the giddy sensations of urban living through strategies such as incorporating the cityscape into kaleidoscopic motion, Iron Man's technologically-determined poise and graceful avoidance of Manhattan's architecture showcase the technologies that enable his powers. The foregrounding of Tony's technologically augmented body is exemplified in the

deployment of another familiar motif from the *Iron Man* films; a close-up on Tony's face, surrounded by digital displays, in his helmet [Figure 105]. Instead of erecting links between superhero and environment, as comparable head-on shots do in *Superman: The Movie*, this motif expresses the human's encasement in technology. When Tony/Iron Man does physically interact with his environment in this sequence, it is only with the arc reactor technology and skyscraper with which he has overlaid Primary World Manhattan. These structures have not previously been seen in MCU films, but the audience is encouraged to accept them as extensions of Tony's technology and capitalist enterprise. Thus, although the connotations of Manhattan are significant, it is primarily environmental additions that Tony/Iron Man makes to this space, and the audience's assumed acclimatisation to the ways he moves and is shot, that conjure his associative frameworks.



*Figure 104 The head-on propulsion motif is deployed as Iron Man flies through Manhattan in MCU Avengers*

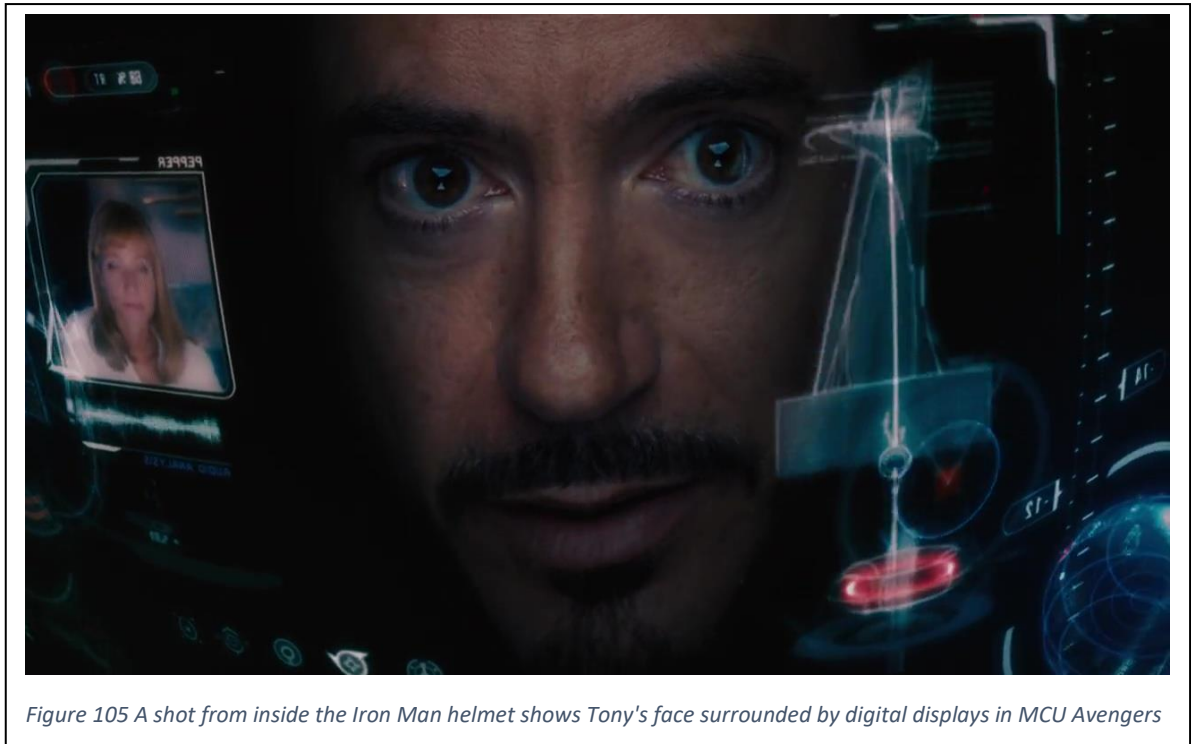


Figure 105 A shot from inside the Iron Man helmet shows Tony's face surrounded by digital displays in MCU *Avengers*

While Tony/Iron Man's ostentatious occupancy of Manhattan affirms his commanding role as powerful capitalist, Natasha/Black Widow's more marginalised status in the MCU is negotiated in her introduction. Natasha/Black Widow is one of only two superheroes in *The Avengers* to have not previously featured in her own film series, the other being Clint Barton/Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner).<sup>603</sup> Natasha's role as S.H.I.E.L.D. spy equips her to infiltrate the spaces inhabited by other characters, for example prominently featuring in *Iron Man 2* and *Winter Soldier*. Natasha's introductory scene in *The Avengers* assigns her a discrete space, placing the spy in a warehouse in her home country of Russia, where she is being held captive by a man in military uniform and two armed henchmen. The setting and situation create a stereotypical scenario for an espionage narrative, signifying the generic framework with which Natasha/Black Widow is strongly affiliated. However, the presentation of Natasha's body conveys far more specific information about her situation in the MCU's textual

<sup>603</sup> Clint/Hawkeye, previously introduced in MCU *Thor* as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, features in the opening sequence of *The Avengers*, which occurs in a S.H.I.E.L.D. facility. Due to Clint/Hawkeye's minimal screen time in *Thor*, upon his introduction in *The Avengers* he has been granted very little of an associative framework within the MCU. Introducing him in the facility identifies S.H.I.E.L.D. as his adoptive home. Clint is first seen in the facility crouched on a walkway near the ceiling where he can overlook the space, recalling his brief role in *Thor* when he watched from a high platform, poised and ready to fire his bow and arrow, as Thor infiltrated the crash site of his hammer, Mjolnir, which at the time was secured by S.H.I.E.L.D..



network. Natasha/Black Widow is tied to a chair, wearing a short black dress and tights. Her arms are pulled behind her and bound to the chair's rear legs so that her back is slightly arched and chest thrust forward. This position of sexualised vulnerability recalls the objectified ways that comic books often depict female superheroes. Carolyn Cocca explains:

In the most extreme version, a female character's back is drawn unnaturally twisted as well as arched, displaying all of her curves in front and back simultaneously. That pose has come to be called 'broke back' since one's back would have to be broken to possibly contort oneself in that way. Female superhero bodies in action may show strength and sexiness at some times, but in such poses cannot but suggest object status and sexualised submission at other times (or at the same time), undercutting their power.<sup>604</sup>

While Johansson's pro-filmic body is not contorted in a biologically impossible position, it remains a sexually submissive pose. Natasha's framing as sexualised object of the audiences' and her domineering male captures' gaze reflects the denial of a space of her own by the networked structure of the MCU, which positions her in supporting roles in male superhero's films.

Mise-en-scène and the ways Natasha/Black Widow's body inhabits this space communicate the MCU's perspective on her femininity. A cutaway shot to a mirror functions, like the mirror in Bruce/Hulk's introduction, to connote duality [Figure 106]. However, while Bruce/Hulk is facing the mirror, confronting his doubled nature, Natasha/Black Widow's reflection shows her with her back to the mirror, situated at a distance from it. This indirect presentation offers no clear route to Natasha/Black Widow's inner self. While the theme of deception is inherent to the spy genre, the use of an ornate framed mirror, an object associated with the maintenance of female beauty, to reflect Natasha/Black Widow's sexualised physique while concealing her interiority, ascribes feminine exhibitions of surface beauty to Natasha/Black Widow's specific mode of deception. The mirror itself is partly concealed by

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<sup>604</sup> Carolyn Cocca, 'The 'Broke Back Test': A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of portrayals of women in mainstream superhero comic books, 1993-2013', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 5:4 (2014), p. 411. Cocca's survey of a selection of superhero comic books from the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s evidences the persistence of such representations. While finding a decline in the amount of objectifying portrayals of women over time, wherein 'in both ensemble and female-headed titles, the percentage of objectification in the 2010s was about half that of the 1990s', many of these more recent comics still featured some objectifying imagery. In fact, out of a total of 144 issues sampled on the survey overall, only eight featured no sexualised depictions of women.

haphazardly piled paintings and weapons, which represent Natasha/Black Widow's combustible amalgam of beauty and danger. Prior to *The Avengers*, Natasha/Black Widow's duplicitous nature and power had been exhibited in the MCU in *Iron Man 2*, in which she initially presents as a notary to Tony before revealing herself as a far more adept fighter than his bodyguard, Happy Hogan (Jon Favreau). This bodily display of concealed power recurs in her introduction in *The Avengers* when, on command, she breaks her confines and easily overpowers her captors. Natasha/Black Widow skillfully uses the chair, the object of her supposed immobilisation, as a weapon. Her feminine body is shown as not weak, but nimble and acrobatic. As Wendy Sterba argues, Natasha/Black Widow uses male expectations of her femininity, evident in her antagonists' underestimation of her ability and the MCU films' frequent fetishisation of her body, to her advantage, playing into, before usurping, perceptions of feminine fragility.<sup>605</sup> Despite not having a series of her own, the MCU's location of deception and sexual allure at the core of Natasha/Black Widow's power enables her associative framework of espionage and dangerous femininity to be communicated by gendered objects and her body itself. Natasha/Black Widow's presentation as sexualised and potentially duplicitous maintains her marginalised status within the masculinised structure of the MCU, while also granting her a unique power and role on the Avengers team.

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<sup>605</sup> Wendy Sterba, 'Buffy and Black Widow, Joss Whedon's Unmasked Female Superheroes and Masked Men', Inter-Disciplinary.Net, (2015), <<http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issues/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/WSterba-super1-dpaper.pdf>>, accessed on 15 December 2015.



Figure 106 A cutaway shot to a mirror connotes Black Widow's duality in MCU Avengers

Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone do not consider whether their notion of genre fractals can be applied to team films that draw together characters from different series. It is evident from the above analysis that the opening act of *The Avengers* exemplifies and streamlines the practice of placing fractal versions of cinematic codes in a wider framework. Characters' associative frameworks are compressed into single spaces, pieces of mise-en-scène, and their bodies. These frameworks convey the characters' genre associations, the area that they inhabit on Wolf's spectrum of worlds and the values they represent. Characters' status within the universe – outcast (Bruce/Hulk), noble but lost (Steve/Captain America), dominant (Tony/Iron Man), objectified (Natasha/Black Widow) – are also conveyed by their associative frameworks, suggesting the potential for a character hierarchy to be organised throughout the film. It is significant that the characters themselves play a direct role in communicating their associative frameworks; their bodies, movements and the ways in which they are presented provide familiar reference points from previous MCU films. In this sense, rather than space representing aspects of characters, as explored in my previous chapters, the characters come to represent the different points that they inhabit on Wolf's spectrum of worlds. This strategy provides a way for *The Avengers* to contain, without needing to explore, the disparate parts of the universe that it draws

together. As the film progresses and the characters are removed from their initial home environments, they continue to embody their individual associative frameworks. I have discussed how links between associative frameworks can be created through strategies such as harnessing points of intersection. Once characters' bodies are seen to express these associative frameworks, their interactions with one another provide sites at which these frameworks can be interlaced.

### *A Hierarchy of Super-Bodies*

MCU *Avengers* redeploys the tendency, discussed earlier, of Marvel's team comics to shift the emphasis from a superhero's personal anxiety to interpersonal tensions between teammates. Although the superheroes in *The Avengers* do not escape their personal torments – Steve/Captain America still feels alienated in the present, Black Widow is haunted by her past, etc. – they each come to embody a relatively stable associative framework, rather than a multiplicity of roles. Bruce/Hulk is the only team member who has a crisis of identity that is foregrounded, as will be discussed later. Containing individual character's multiplicities enables the film to instead explore the multiplicities that the diverse superheroes generate as a team, and situate them in relation to one another.

The body types and powers of each Avenger correlate with the points at which their associative frameworks link into Wolf's spectrum of worlds. The ontology of each character's body further refines their individual frameworks. At one end of the spectrum, nearest the Primary World, are the unmodified bodies of Black Widow and Hawkeye. These employees of S.H.I.E.L.D., an overlaid agency, have mastered abilities that the human body can naturally possess, from seduction to proficiency with Primary World weapons. Their bodies are primarily profilmic, enabling their natural abilities to be showcased while also emphasising their mortal susceptibility. As we move along Wolf's spectrum, natural bodies are altered by overlaid scientific developments situated in frameworks of advanced human warfare. Captain America and Hulk have biologically modified bodies that grant them physical powers. Captain America has a primarily profilmic body that can be wounded, but when displaying superhuman agility is often realised digitally. Hulk's body is a purely digital construct, connoting his detachment from humanity, yet paradoxically is the body that most relentlessly asserts materiality.

For Captain America and Hulk, the digital realises their enhanced physical properties. At a similar point on Wolf's spectrum is Iron Man, whose superpowers come from the overlaid technology of his exoskeleton. Iron Man's body is a profilmic/digital hybrid that becomes digital when in flight and has digital beams emanating from each limb. At the far end of Wolf's spectrum is Thor, possessing a supernatural body imbued with super strength and magical powers that are inherent to his origin on the fictional realm of Asgard. Unlike Iron Man, Thor's profilmic/digital hybrid body is not fully covered when in costume, enabling Hemsworth's muscular physique to be exhibited. The digital intervenes when Thor uses magic, transforming his body from profilmic to digital during flight, or manifesting lightning bolts. Another significant body also inhabits the supernatural end of Wolf's spectrum: Loki's (Tom Hiddleston). The trickster god does not have physically-oriented powers like Thor, but has the ability, realised through digital means, to magically transform and teleport his profilmic body.

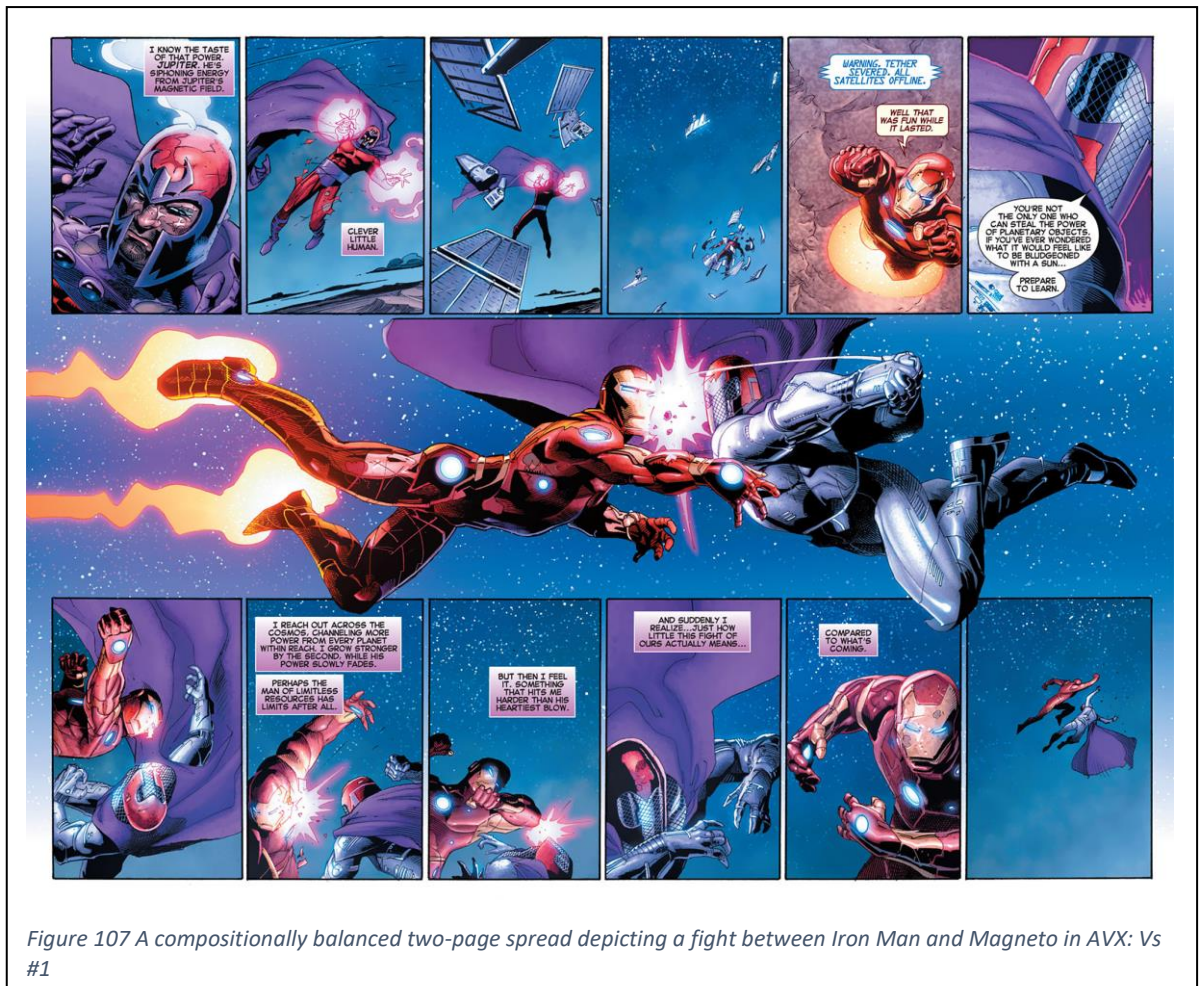
This summary suggests that, while the source of each character's powers can be situated at a different point on Wolf's spectrum of worlds, the qualities of these powers and their corresponding body types offer a range of other differentiating criteria in addition to degrees of fictionalisation. For example, Hulk and Iron Man may occupy comparable associative frameworks pertaining to scientifically advanced warfare, but their powers are biological and technological respectively, and their body types very different, both diegetically and ontologically. Other significant components of characters' associative frameworks that have emerged from my analysis so far include gender, nationality and values. All the above criteria influence how characters are situated in relation to one another in *The Avengers*. Borrowing a strategy from superhero comic books, the film stages antagonistic encounters between characters in order to illuminate the network of comparisons and contrasts between them. *The Avengers* stages encounters between both similar and pointedly opposed body types. Following Reynolds' discussion of superhero battles mapping a character hierarchy, analysing these sequences enables exploration of whether a hierarchy provides a more appropriate model than a spectrum for framing how *The Avengers* organises its characters.

Balanced compositions and/or page layouts that connote an equal match are a common strategy for presenting superhero vs superhero battles in comic books. For example, a two-page spread from *AVX: Vs #1* features evenly laid out strips running along the top and bottom thirds, while the fighting superheroes, Magneto and Iron Man, are granted equal space in the middle [Figure 107].<sup>606</sup> Following Molotiu's concept of iconostasis, as discussed in previous chapters, the abstract quality of this composition, primarily its symmetry, is striking in itself.<sup>607</sup> The sense of balance through symmetrical juxtaposition of still images also functions conceptually to suggest the two combatants' equivalence. The scene in *MCU Avengers* in which Thor and Iron Man fight in a forest (a neutral space with which neither are firmly associated) exhibits a cinematic metamorphosis of this strategy. As the superheroes exchange blows throughout the fight, the back-and-forth editing rhythm enforces a sense of balance. Each combatant demonstrates advantages in certain areas, while at other times using individual approaches to the same effect. For example, a hurled Mjolnir and repulsor-propelled kick drive Iron Man and Thor, respectively, through trees, exhibiting the weapons' distinct qualities but equal force. Thus, the cinematic metamorphosis deploys rhythmic editing and movements that reflect one another in their quality and impact.

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<sup>606</sup> Jason Aaron (w), Adam Kubert (a) and Morry Hollowell (c), 'The Invincible Iron Man vs. Magneto', *AVX: Vs #1* (New York: Marvel Comics, June 2012). *AVX: Vs* is a limited series, exclusively depicting superhero vs. superhero battles, that ties into the *Avengers vs. X-Men* crossover event, which was released the same summer as the *MCU Avengers* was. In fact, *AVX: Vs #1* was released in the U.S. on 24 April 2012, nine days before *MCU Avengers*. It should be noted that while Magneto and Iron Man have equal space in the composition, only Magneto's thoughts are relayed in the captions, seemingly creating a compositional imbalance. However, this is offset by the fact that the preceding two-page spread features Iron Man's thoughts. This feature partakes in a strategy of balance and exchange that works across the story as a whole.

<sup>607</sup> Molotiu, 'Abstract Form', p. 91.



Within these rhythms and symmetries, other devices used by both the comic and film refine relations between characters to map their individual qualities. The double page spread from *AVX: Vs #1* and the Thor vs Iron Man scene from *The Avengers* connote the characters' associative frameworks through a visual device that originated in comics, which Burke discusses as 'krackle'; 'the abstract coloured shapes that convey a superpowered character's abilities'.<sup>608</sup> Burke discusses the use of krackle to represent powers that do not themselves have tangible properties, such as Magneto's telekinetic manipulation of metal. In MCU *Avengers*, Thor and Iron Man's digitally rendered lightning bolts and repulsor beams are understood to both have tangible forms within the diegesis, yet their glowing colours and obtrusive presence causes them to function in a highly stylised, rather than perceptually realistic, mode. This trait supports Burke's claim that the deployment of krackle in film is an aspect of

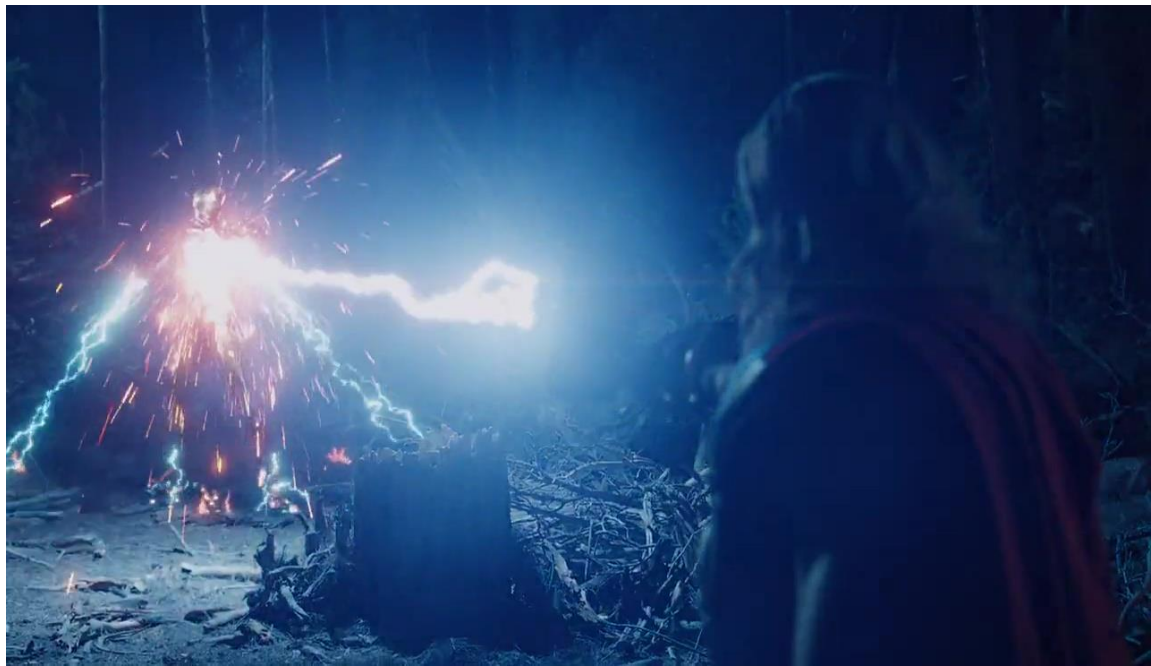
<sup>608</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, p. 219.

heightened reality that pointedly recreates the stylised modes of representation associated with comics, rather than being motivated by expectations of physical reality. In *AVX: Vs #1*, Magneto's magnetic fields form purple irregular orbs while Iron Man's repulsors emit orange lines. In MCU *Avengers*, electric blue emanates from Thor's white lightning bolts, which fire in lively, jagged lines and spark as they connect with Iron Man's metal armour [Figure 108]. The blue and white of Thor's bolts are cold colours, connoting the Nordic environments in which his mythology is rooted. Meanwhile, Iron Man's streamlined orange beams [Figure 109] are products of his advanced engineering capabilities, and connote his extravagant wealth through recalling the colour of the hot rod on which he based his exoskeleton's colour-scheme in MCU *Iron Man*. The appearance and conceptual connotations of the different kinds of crackle therefore provide points of differentiation.<sup>609</sup> However, these qualities also interlink the characters. The elemental colour and shape of Thor's lightning bolts suggests their electrical properties, which creates an obvious link to the technology that powers Iron Man's suit. This link is made explicit within the diegesis when Thor fires a lightning bolt that charges Iron Man's suit, bridging the gap between Thor's mythical and Iron Man's technological frameworks. Thus, the striking colours and shapes of digital crackle in MCU *Avengers* forego strict perceptual realism to convey abstract and conceptual qualities of the powers it represents, which illuminate relations between different characters.

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<sup>609</sup> These colours adhere to their respective character's iconography. The association of each superhero with a particular colour, or set of colours, enables their costumes and iconography to be placed on a literal spectrum in relation to one another. In MCU *Avengers*, Iron Man's armour is primarily red and gold, Hulk's skin is green, Thor's armour is chrome and his cape red, and Captain America is garbed the colours of the U.S. flag. As S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, Black Widow and Hawkeye's costumes are predominantly black, but Black Widow is distinguished by her red hair, Hawkeye by his costume's purple detail.





*Figure 108 Thor fires jagged bolts of lightning from his hammer in MCU Avengers*



*Figure 109 Iron Man fires streamlined repulsor beams from his palms in MCU Avengers*

Thor and Iron Man direct these lightning bolts and repulsor beams at each other in the opening moves of the battle, effectively testing the digital manifestations of their profilmic/digital hybrid bodies against one another. The combinations of actors, costumes and CGI used to realise these bodies exhibit

Purse's notion of hybrid indexicality, as discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>610</sup> Different elements of these hybrid forms are foregrounded as the fight progresses. After the initial exchange the characters take to the sky, bodies oscillating between profilmic and digital forms, before landing and exchanging physical blows that emphasise the impact of profilmic bodies on one another. While airborne, the characters interact with space in perceptually realistic ways, for example shards scraping off a mountain as Iron Man drags Thor along it. During this flight the two characters are engaged in a frantic grapple, both exerting and sustaining physical force, but neither prevails or surrenders. Their magically and technologically augmented bodies seem evenly matched as they land to exchange a series of blows in a fraught yet balanced manner. Each combatant demonstrates advantages in certain areas. For instance, Thor performs the most powerful headbutt while Iron Man's repulsors enable swift recovery after being thrown to the floor. The execution of certain moves continues to be realised using CGI, but the emphasis is on their physical impact on the opponent, underscored by Hemsworth and Downey's Jr.'s range of intense facial expressions. The physicality of the characters' bodies demonstrates that their distinct power-sets facilitate comparable levels of force and resistance.

The sense of equivalence that this fight creates interlace the two superheroes' disparate associate frameworks and the areas of the universe they embody, while effectively elevating human Iron Man to the status of supernatural god Thor. The technologies that American entrepreneur Tony has developed enable him to engage in evenly-matched physical combat with Thor, thus conceptually putting him on an equal footing with gods. This encounter grants both characters equal hierarchical status, while asserting Iron Man's superiority over other humans.

While the digital and profilmic qualities of Thor's and Iron Man's bodies test powers used in physical combat against one another, Black Widow's interrogation of Loki provides an instance of two characters in a battle of psychological manipulation. During the interrogation, Black Widow succeeds in getting Loki to unwittingly reveal his ploy, and Loki succeeds in unearthing Black Widow's guilt over

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<sup>610</sup> Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema*, pp. 5-6.

her past misdeeds. As with Thor and Iron Man's fight, rhythmic cutting and matched imagery connotes this equal match of abilities. For example, at one point Black Widow's and Loki's postures reflect each other: both perform composure by sitting hands in lap, leaning forward slightly, in separate shots [Figure 110 and Figure 111]. The image that most encapsulates the nature of Black Widow and Loki's comparability occurs as Loki approaches the glass door of his cell. Black Widow is in mid-shot to the right of the frame while the camera is positioned inside the cell so that Loki's enraged reflection shows on the left [Figure 112]. The earlier shot of a mirror in Black Widow's introduction obscured her true self; this reflection provides a clear representation of her psyche. While denoting that Loki has got into Black Widow's head, the shot more significantly suggests that he was already there in the sense that he is positioned as her reflection, her counterpart in the film. Their equivalence places Black Widow and Loki, two non-American characters (Black Widow is Russian while Loki is diegetically from the realm of Jotunheim but associated with Europe due to his roots in Norse mythology and Hiddleston's British accent), at a comparable point on the character hierarchy. Black Widow's abilities now lose their unique status and, through being shared by the outwardly nefarious Loki, have their unscrupulous potential underscored. Furthermore, if Black Widow's powers of deception are interlocked with her femininity, Loki's duplicitous nature makes him a feminised man, the antithesis of the muscular masculinity exhibited by stepbrother Thor.<sup>611</sup> Ascribing feminised masculinity to the film's villain situates this quality even lower on the character hierarchy than Black Widow's femininity, in stark contrast to the spectacular masculine heroics of Thor and Iron Man, who sit atop the hierarchy. Tellingly, when Thor and Iron Man battle, Loki only spectates and schemes.

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<sup>611</sup> In Marvel's 616 universe, Loki is typically disassociated from hegemonic masculinity. He has taken female form on multiple occasions and, in *Young Avengers Volume 2* #15, suggests that he is effectively bisexual, propositioning bisexual superhero David Alleyne/Prodigy and then informing him that "[m]y culture doesn't really share your concept of sexual identity. There are sexual acts, that's it". Kieron Gillen (w), Jamie McKelvie (a), Becky Cloonan (a), et al., 'Resolution, Part 2', *Young Avengers Volume 2* #15 (New York: Marvel Comics, March 2014).



Figure 110 Black Widow sits calmly as she manipulates Loki in MCU Avengers



Figure 111 Loki sits calmly as he manipulates Black Widow in MCU Avengers



Figure 112 Black Widow is juxtaposed against Loki's reflection in MCU Avengers

Encounters that pit opposed body types against each other elucidate the hierarchy's arrangement and governing principles. Bukatman discusses Hulk as exemplary of a superhero archetype that bodily manifests 'an aggressive hypermasculinity, a compensation for psycho-sexual anxiety that depends upon a ruthless suppression or... an obliteration of the feminine'.<sup>612</sup> In *MCU Avengers*, CGI enables Hulk's hypermasculine musculature to be realised to inhuman proportions. Upon Bruce's first transformation into Hulk, he is placed in tension with the body that is his antithesis: Black Widow's feminine profilmic body. This pairing enables the horror elements of Hulk's associative framework to

<sup>612</sup> Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, p. 61.

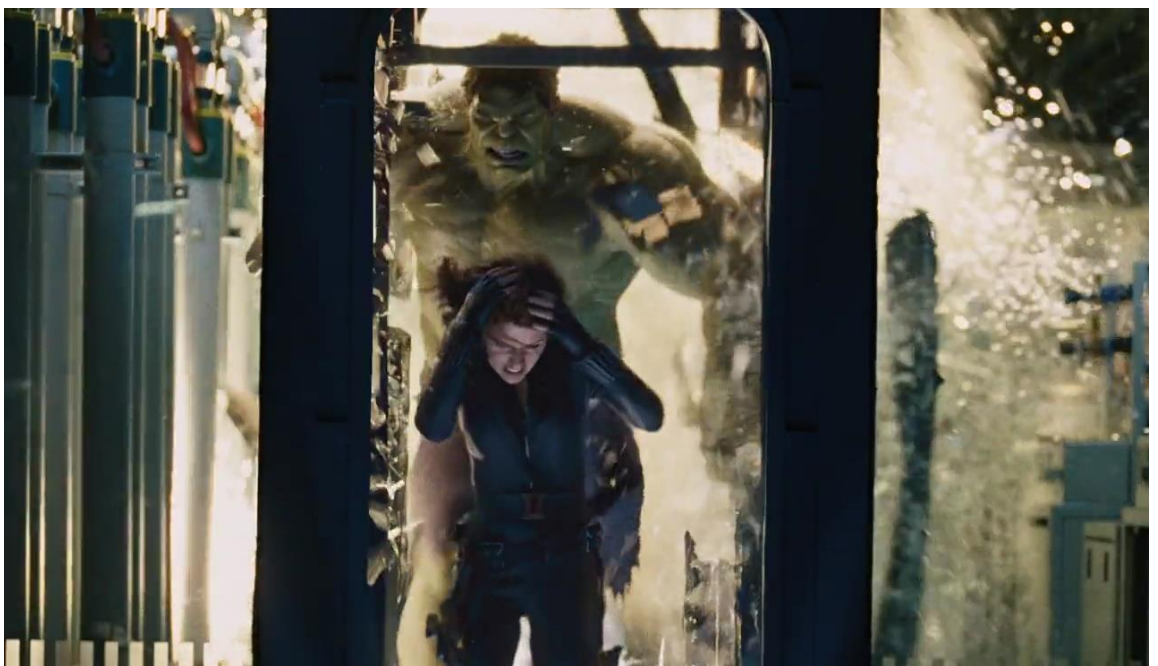
be foregrounded as he hunts his female quarry in an isolated, low-lit part of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s helicarrier. The way Hulk damages space, leaving imprints of his heavy fists in gas tanks and bending metal floor panels, asserts his physicality and the threat he poses to Black Widow. Hulk emits animalistic roars and grunts, while his hunched posture and long, swinging arms are comparable to those of a gorilla [Figure 113]. Bukatman draws attention to the bulging neck muscles of hypermasculine superheroes, arguing that these contribute to the figures resembling giant phalluses.<sup>613</sup> The large muscles on the back of Hulk's neck also push his head downward into his gorilla-like posture. Hulk's movements, vocalisation and posture thus exhibit perceptual realism in the sense that they recall real organic creatures, in particular primates in the same genealogy as humans. Hulk's digital body, unlike Spider-Man's, or Iron Man's exoskeleton, is an expressive body driven by primal instincts. Hulk's instinctual masculine aggression is foregrounded as he pursues Black Widow through a corridor lined by metal arches and glass. While Black Widow fits easily through this corridor, Hulk's arms plough through the structure, shattering metal and glass [Figure 114]. The juxtaposition of gorilla and slender feminine body is in the generic tradition of the *King Kong* franchise. In MCU *Incredible Hulk* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015), female characters – Betty and Black Widow, respectively – calm Hulk by arousing his affection, much like King Kong's female companions. However, as Hulk chases Black Widow in MCU *Avengers*, the sexualised connotations of this pairing only signify the vulnerability of the feminine to the masculine. Once Hulk catches up he swats Black Widow to the side with one arm, throwing her body into a wall. This casual swipe mitigates the scene's sexual connotations by demonstrating Hulk's disinterest, but also grants Hulk an effortless victory. Later in the film, Hulk wins a comparably easy triumph against Black Widow's counterpart Loki, holding him by the feet and smashing him repeatedly against the floor. Hulk's defeats of Black Widow and Loki assert the superiority of hypermasculine brawn over feminine duplicity in the film's character hierarchy.

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<sup>613</sup> Ibid., p. 61.



*Figure 113 Hulk's hunched posture and long swinging arms in MCU Avengers recall those of a gorilla*



*Figure 114 Hulk pursues Black Widow in MCU Avengers*

Bruce/Hulk is the only superhero in *MCU Avengers* whose personal anxieties provide a key force in driving the narrative, with his progress toward reconciling his two identities facilitating the team's eventual harmonisation. Examining how Hulk's body's presentation contributes to the arc of Bruce

learning to control Hulk that develops between Lee's *Hulk*, MCU *Incredible Hulk* and *The Avengers* can illuminate its role in denoting the balance of Bruce/Hulk's psychology.

Bukatman interlocks the hypermasculine superhero archetype with the figure of the bodybuilder, seeing in the idea that defines both 'an attempt to *recenter the self* in the body, a reductive conflation of body with subjectivity'.<sup>614</sup> The first live-action screen incarnation of *Hulk*, the 1978 television series, literally combines the hypermasculine superhero and bodybuilder by having bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno play Hulk.<sup>615</sup> Bill Bixby plays David Banner (renamed from Bruce). The complete lack of indexical relation between David's and Hulk's bodies augments the sense of the self being displaced onto the body. Bixby's David is driven by pragmatism and a strong moral conscience. David's scientific reason is utterly lost in Ferrigno's Hulk, who foregrounds his body as subject via the recurrent motif of flexing his muscles while roaring, recalling the practiced poses that comprise bodybuilding contests. Ferrigno's body does perform emotions other than anger, for example showing affection for David's allies, but these are expressions of instinct, rather than cognitive thought. The psychological division between David and Hulk is comparable to an ego/id split, which James N. Gilmore identifies as the traditional schema of *Hulk* texts.<sup>616</sup> However, in this schema the human scientist also exhibits the moral compass of the superego. The typical split between identities in the *Hulk* matrix can therefore be more accurately generalised as one of conscious and subconscious. The disconnect of Bixby and Ferrigno manifests the dominant theme from the *Hulk* matrix in which Bruce fears that his transformation into Hulk will negate his subjectivity, that the conscious will be lost to the subconscious.

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<sup>614</sup> Ibid., p. 61. Emphasis in original.

<sup>615</sup> Lee's *Hulk*, MCU *Incredible Hulk* and *The Avengers* all feature Ferrigno to varying degrees. He cameos in both Lee's *Hulk* and the MCU *Incredible Hulk* as a security guard, in the former conversing with Stan Lee, while in the latter Bruce bribes him with a pizza to gain access to a college research laboratory. When Ferrigno stands to receive the pizza, Bruce's intimidated glance pointedly acknowledges his height and physique. Meanwhile, in the two MCU films Ferrigno contributes voice acting for Hulk.

<sup>616</sup> James N. Gilmore, 'Will You Like Me When I'm Angry?: Discourses of the Digital in *Hulk* and *The Incredible Hulk*', in Gilmore and Stork (ed.), *Superhero Synergies: Comic Book Characters Go Digital* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p. 19.

Lee's *Hulk* exhibits a similar indexical rupture between Bruce and Hulk. Lee himself, rather than actor Eric Bana, performed for motion capture for Hulk's digital body.<sup>617</sup> Gilmore argues that, while cinematic superheroes' digital bodies can represent 'a manifest of the ideal ego', as evident in Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy, digitally rendered incarnations of Hulk diegetically articulate a monstrous self that Bruce resents and fears.<sup>618</sup> However, in Lee's *Hulk* the disconnect between Bana's and Hulk's bodies creates a more complex psychological relation than that of human and monstrous subconscious. Bana's Bruce has repressed his childhood trauma and, along with this, his emotions. Hulk manifests Bruce's emotions. The transformation enacts not a transference of subjectivity to the body, but a regaining of Bruce's lost subjectivity. Although Bruce does not have cognitive control over Hulk, Hulk instinctively enacts the range of Bruce's unlocked feelings, directing anger toward his father and compassion toward Betty. Purse discusses how critics responded negatively to lapses of perceptual realism in Hulk's realisation, and attributes these inadequacies to 'the decision to articulate the Hulk's internally conflicted state and his subsequent emotional trajectory through an expressionistic mode of correspondences'.<sup>619</sup> For example, Hulk's stature is unstable, fluctuating in correlation with his anger. Elsewhere, Hulk's apparent weightlessness defies the laws of physics as he bounces through the desert, soaring high and far with each bound. During one leap Hulk is shown in mid-shot gliding gracefully through the air, arms held out to the side and face calm, while African drums on the soundtrack (complemented by singing in subsequent shots) signify that he is at spiritual peace [Figure 115]. Although eschewing criteria of perceptual realism, this technique conceptually connotes that Hulk offers a release from the prison Bruce has constructed around his psyche. Hulk's final victory over Bruce's dad, David, is won not through physical battle, but when David attempts to absorb Hulk's power and, it is suggested, cannot handle the strain of the trauma that drives Hulk. Throughout the

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<sup>617</sup> This motion capture was reportedly undertaken after audiences responded negatively to early footage of the digitally rendered Hulk. Whitney Crothers Dilley, *The Cinema of Ang Lee: The Other Side of the Screen* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2015), p. 139.

<sup>618</sup> Gilmore, 'Will You Like Me When I'm Angry?', p. 13.

<sup>619</sup> Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema*, p. 64.



film, Hulk's physical form conceptually connotes the liberation of Bruce's repressed subjectivity, which eventually becomes a weapon itself.



Figure 115 Hulk glides gracefully and calmly through the air in Lee's *Hulk*

MCU *Incredible Hulk* and *The Avengers* reform the conscious/subconscious dichotomy and place the emphasis back on Hulk's physicality. The films employ increasingly sophisticated motion capture techniques that inscribe the performances of Norton and Ruffalo onto Hulk's digital body. These techniques are promoted in paratextual materials and critical discourses.<sup>620</sup> Meanwhile, within the films, shots that linger on Hulk's physique showcase increased fidelity to the performer's expressivity. A mid-shot of Hulk in *The Incredible Hulk* performs this function, while the veins that bulge through his skin and his heaving diaphragm assert perceptually realistic correspondences to the biological makeup of organic creatures [Figure 116]. Hulk's bulging veins denote that his organic physique is being pushed to its limit; unlike the fluctuating body in Lee's *Hulk*, this body has a fixed physical shape. The emphasis

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<sup>620</sup> For example, Gilmore discusses paratexts featured on the home video release of *The Incredible Hulk* that detail the motion capture techniques to promote a narrative about the physical labour Norton put into creating Hulk. Gilmore argues that this narrative reflects Banner's diegetic transformation into Hulk. There are interesting parallels between this and *Batman Begins*' paratextual discourse that aligns Bale's fitness regime in preparing for the role with Bruce Wayne's 'journey'. In each case, a greater bond between actor and character is created through emphasising the actor's physical labour. Gilmore, 'Will You Like Me When I'm Angry?', pp. 15-16.

on Hulk's excessive yet stable physicality connotes the displacement of the subject onto the body. Bruce's feelings are performed at points, such as when Hulk carefully cradles Betty and lays her down safely in the cave. In this scene, as Hulk gazes inquisitively at Betty, struggling to understand his feelings for her, then roars and hurls rocks at the sky in an attempt to protect Betty from lightning, Hulk's emotive range and understanding of the world is a blend of animal and human child. While the indexical trace of Norton on Hulk's body connotes an increased control of the human over the monster, the animalistic and childish qualities of Hulk's gestures and expressions mark his level of humanity as undeveloped. Bruce has gained a degree of control over Hulk, but is unable to fully exercise his subjectivity. The humanity with which Bruce imbues Hulk is exhibited by the contrast Abomination provides in the climactic battle. In Lee's film, Hulk's main antagonist is the father responsible for his trauma, who must be fought on a conceptual plane; in MCU *Incredible Hulk*, Abomination represents the horrific potential of Hulk's mutated physicality, Abomination's reptilian appearance receding even further from humanity on the evolutionary scale. By defeating Abomination in physical combat, Bruce demonstrates his ability to manage and wield Hulk's destructive physique.



*Figure 116 Hulk's veins bulge through his skin in MCU Incredible Hulk*

As already discussed, Hulk's physicality continues to be foregrounded in MCU *Avengers*. The twofold nature of the strategies used to realise Hulk's body in perceptually realistic ways in *The Avengers* – on the one hand, having him move like a gorilla and, on the other, inscribing him with the performance of

a human actor – provide the means through which the two sides of Bruce/Hulk’s identity can be reconciled. Hulk’s mannerisms and gestures, from his animalistic movements to his emotive facial expressions, are all performed by Ruffalo (before being developed by digital effects artists). Ruffalo can either perform animalistic instinct, as he does during the transformation aboard the helicarrier, or more cognitively aware actions. Correspondences between Bruce’s and Hulk’s bodies are augmented by Ruffalo’s performance of Bruce as nervy and fidgety, suggesting a discomfort in his body and the spaces he inhabits that reflects Hulk’s disruptive physicality. Upon Bruce/Hulk’s second transformation in *The Avengers*, a textual marker of Ruffalo’s performance signifies that Hulk’s instinct and Bruce’s conscience are harmonising. Having arrived at the climactic battle, Bruce implies that he has learned to control his transformations and, on command, transforms into Hulk and punches a Chitauri leviathan in one fluid movement. The bulk of this transformation is presented in one take that shows Ruffalo’s features morphing into Hulk’s, exhibiting the trace that the man’s expressions leave in the monster’s scowl [Figure 117]. Bruce begins the shot looking at his teammates to screen left and in one assured motion turns around to face the leviathan (screen right) as his features scrunch and head enlarges, denoting that the enraged creature that emerges is one whose anger is managed and directed by the human. In the MCU, actors’ increasing correspondences with Hulk’s body, and the extra-textual narrative of evolving motion capture techniques, parallel and enforce the character arc regarding Bruce gaining greater control over Hulk.



*Figure 117 Four stills from Bruce/Hulk's second transformation in MCU Avengers*

The reconciliation of Bruce/Hulk's humanity and animalistic qualities, and of Ruffalo's profilmic and Hulk's digital bodies, heralds the diverse superheroes fully gelling as a team. After Iron Man fires a digital missile at the leviathan's exposed flesh, the superheroes react to the ensuing explosion and shower of armour in ways befitting their body types. Hawkeye shelters his unpowered human body behind a car; Captain America, exhibiting the chivalrous attitude ascribed to his World War II framework, uses his shield to protect Black Widow's feminine body; Thor, not needing to protect his magically-imbued body, merely covers his eyes with his hand. It is significant that Hulk's hypermasculine materiality and Iron Man's self-made technology provide the winning blows in this key step toward the team's victory. The hierarchy again favours the physical and celebrates the American entrepreneur, while even the Asgardian god only reacts. Subsequently, the superheroes form a circle as the camera rotates around them in one continuous take. Stork proposes that this shot translates the worded identifier 'Avengers assemble' into a moving image.<sup>621</sup> It also metamorphoses, through both character and camera movement, superhero team comics' tendency to display the team

<sup>621</sup> Stork, 'Assembling the Avengers', pp. 77-78.

assembled in a single panel, as evident in the last panel of *The Avengers* #1, the first time the whole team occupy the same space within a panel. In the shot from MCU *Avengers*, the character's roles are each economically connoted in a single gesture: Hulk directs an animalistic roar – which now functions as a battle cry – at the Chitauri, Hawkeye loads his bow and arrow, Thor raises Mjolnir, Black Widow reloads her gun (her powers of manipulation unusable in the heat of physical war), Captain America grips his shield and Iron Man uses his repulsors to slowly descend. These gestures illuminate each character's various roles, asserting that, despite being situated on a hierarchy, they each contribute something different to the team, while their discrete associative frameworks are interlaced by a shared desire to counter threats to humanity.

There is no single logic governing the representation of bodies in MCU *Avengers*. My analysis of Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy demonstrated that interactions between profilmic and digital bodies are used to stage tensions between the human and the inhuman. In MCU *Avengers*, the ontology of bodies does not provide a comparably fixed framework to explore relations between characters. CGI is used to represent a range of phenomena, from the physical and the technological to the magical. While each use of CGI modifies the human body, interactions between the different bodies can enact a range of tensions while revealing points of intersection, such as between the material and the immaterial, or technology and magic. The qualities of characters' bodies and movements – abstract, conceptual or perceptually realistic – are determined by their body type along with the bodies of characters with whom they are placed in tension. When we compare various antagonistic encounters between superheroes within the film, similarly to how fans read across texts in Reynolds' notion of hierarchical continuity, a hierarchy of characters emerges that is informed by a range of criteria from their associative frameworks. Individually, these criteria could be used to place the characters on spectrums in relation to one another, such as a spectrum of fictionalisation based on Wolf's spectrum of worlds, a spectrum of physiques or a spectrum of values. Together, the criteria are combined and factored into the construction of a hierarchy that favours certain qualities. This hierarchy has the potential to shift in subsequent texts as new characters are added and new encounters staged. Focusing on the

placement of characters' values in relation to one another in the MCU enables examination of how these are presented and arranged at key stages in the hierarchy's development.

### Assembling the Avengers' Politics

In the previous chapter I demonstrated the key role that space in Raimi's *Spider-Man* plays in expressing and negotiating different sets of sociopolitical values. In MCU *Avengers*, when the role of space in signifying different aspects of characters is transferred to bodies, do these bodies then become the sites at which values are exchanged? I will now explore ways in which the MCU's networked structure and *The Avengers'* uses of space and bodies affect the presentation of sociopolitical values.

Sociopolitical values can form a significant part of superheroes' associative frameworks, and are informed by a character's textual and cultural history. Different films in a character's series can provide varying perspectives on these values. For example, MCU *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2* feature Middle Eastern and Eastern European terrorists, respectively, who are allied to varying degrees with U.S. businessmen. *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013) reconfigures this relationship to the effect that its Eastern terrorist, The Mandarin (Ben Kingsley), turns out to be a fictional figure constructed by a U.S. businessman, effectively suggesting that the stereotyped terrorists in the previous two films are themselves constructs of the U.S. imaginary. Despite this critique, *Iron Man 3* continues the previous films' heroic presentation of U.S. entrepreneurial capitalist Tony/Iron Man, thus exhibiting complicity in only reconfiguring, rather than wholly subverting, the series' presentation of U.S. hegemony. Carolyn Jess-Cooke argues that film sequels intrinsically prompt this kind of reflection, stating that 'the sequel is essentially a response to a previous work, a rereading and rewriting of an 'original' that additionally calls upon an audience to reread and rewrite their memories of a previous text'.<sup>622</sup> This

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<sup>622</sup> Carolyn Jess-Cooke, *Film Sequels: Theory and Practice from Hollywood to Bollywood* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 12-13.

mode of spectatorship envisions sequels as windows through which audiences reengage with and reassess preceding texts.<sup>623</sup>

The networked structure of the MCU presents the opportunity not just for sequels to prompt reflection on preceding texts in the series, but for texts in different series to reflect on one another. The *Iron Man* series' concern with issues of war and U.S. military policy is one shared by other MCU series. McSweeney, when discussing the MCU in relation to 9/11, goes so far as to assert that the military-industrial complex 'emerges as the central villain throughout the post-9/11 Marvel cycle'.<sup>624</sup> For example, *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Iron Man 2* each feature villains who are representatives of, or aided by, the military-industrial complex, gaining access to the technology that modifies the protagonists' bodies.<sup>625</sup> While these three films from two series share similar perspectives on the military-industrial complex, MCU *Captain America* presents a somewhat different view on wartime themes. Close analysis of *Captain America* can explicate its perspective, and reveal the sociopolitical dialogue it enacts with other MCU series.

Vu reads MCU *Captain America* as exuding intense nationalism while ignoring pertinent elements of World War II. The effect is that 'an idealised America is set off against a sanitised Nazi party; American exceptionalism is asserted without ever being explicitly justified in historical terms', exacerbated by the film overlooking racial segregation in the U.S., while the subsequent transition of Captain America to the present negates the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>626</sup> As with Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy, MCU *Captain America's* nostalgic sensibilities are complicit in the perpetuation of conservative constructions of an

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<sup>623</sup> Although Jess-Cooke primarily frames this process as one in which a viewer's memories of the previous film are rewritten, it can also encourage thematic reflection and juxtaposition. Jess-Cooke's discussion of how sequels rewrite memory is fully articulated her chapter titled 'Sequels and Secondary Memory: Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.*'. Jess-Cooke, *Film Sequels*, pp. 130-152.

<sup>624</sup> McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film*, p. 127.

<sup>625</sup> For detailed discussions of the ways in which these films can be seen to critique the military-industrial complex in the context of 9/11 and the "War on Terror" see McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film*, pp. 126-127; Pheasant-Kelly, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, pp. 143-159; and Spanakos, 'Exceptional Recognition', pp. 15-28.

<sup>626</sup> Vu, 'Marvel Cinematic Universality', p. 126. For similar discussions of the film's sanitised and depoliticised depiction of World War II see Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, pp. 102-104; and McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film*, pp. 128-129.

idealised past. However, as demonstrated in my analysis of Raimi's *Spider-Man* films, the nostalgic tendencies of superhero texts can also perform reflective critical functions. This kind of critical reflection forms a key component of many texts from the *Captain America* matrix. In his analysis of the *Transformers* franchise, Derek Johnson explores how franchises can shift across space and time, enacting exchanges across different national sites of production and creative agents, while maintaining dialogue with their pasts.<sup>627</sup> Superhero franchises generally fixate on U.S. icons, but shift the perspectives they offer on national contexts through temporal development.<sup>628</sup> Initially created during World War II to embody U.S. patriotism, Captain America adopted a peculiar temporal relationship to this historical context when resurrected two decades later both diegetically and extra-diegetically.<sup>629</sup> Literally frozen in time within the diegesis and thawed shortly after the Avengers' initial formation in 616 continuity, Captain America's status as emblem of U.S. military past existing in the present has frequently been used to critically reflect on the nation's historical and contemporary wartime politics. For example, when discussing post-9/11 *Captain America* comics by John Ney Rieber and John Cassaday, Jenkins observes that 'the series sets up a strong contrast between its retro-style covers strongly influenced by World War II recruitment posters and the stories inside, which interrogate such patriotic rhetoric'.<sup>630</sup>

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<sup>627</sup> Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), pp. 153-196.

<sup>628</sup> There are of course incarnations of U.S. superheroes that have been produced in other national contexts, such as *Supaidāman*, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, these tend to be exceptions that are in the minority. Superheroes created in nations outside of the U.S. also exist, although are again outnumbered by their U.S. counterparts. Examples include Zenith, a British superhero whose series was published in British comics anthology *2000 AD*; Darna, a Filipino superhero who has appeared in a comparable range of media to popular American superheroes since the 1950s; and Krrish, an Indian superhero who has featured in two Bollywood films (*Krrish* (Rakesh Roshan, 2006) and *Krrish 3* (Rakesh Roshan, 2013)).

<sup>629</sup> After World War II, comics featuring Captain America continued to be published until 1949. The character was briefly revived in 1953-1955 to feature in stories in which he battled communists, although these did not prove popular. For a brief discussion of the sociopolitical significance of this period of Captain America being subsequently retconned in *The Avengers* #4, which reveals that the superhero had been frozen in ice since World War II, and a later story that asserts that the communist fighting Captain America was actually an imposter, see Christopher J. Hayton and David L. Albright, 'O Captain! My Captain' in Robert G. Weiner (ed.), *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), p. 17.

<sup>630</sup> Jenkins, 'Captain America Sheds his Mighty Tears', p. 84.



Set during World War II, MCU *Captain America* presents the diegetic past of the MCU, while reflecting on Captain America's extra-diegetic status as a fictional icon created, and utilised as propaganda, in the 1940s. This latter function is foregrounded during a vibrant sequence in which Captain America promotes war bonds on the home front and performs for troops in United Service Organizations shows. Captain America's costume and shield in this sequence are modelled on those of his Golden Age comic book incarnation. His media history is further mapped through intercut shots of children and soldiers reading *Captain America* comics, Captain America starring in a film, and a staple of the stage show being him punching Hitler in a reflection of the iconic cover of *Captain America* #1.<sup>631</sup> While the comic book cover depicts Captain America striking a diegetic incarnation of Hitler [Figure 118], in the film his adversary is, within the diegesis, an actor playing Hitler (James Payton) against a backdrop of gasping chorus girls dressed in outfits themed on the U.S. flag [Figure 119]. The gaudy artifice, which exemplifies the sequence's tone, ascribes these qualities to the comic book cover to reflect on the use of comic books and superheroes to promote wartime jingoism.<sup>632</sup> The compatibility of Boym's reflective form of nostalgia and Hutcheon's discussion of postmodern nostalgia as a form of complicitous critique, as discussed in the previous chapter, highlights this sequence's critical function. On the one hand, the sequence affectionately traces Captain America's media history and, as argued by Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, mocks a bureaucratic military system that prioritises public perception of the war over letting soldiers fight.<sup>633</sup> On the other, the sequence parodies strategies through which superheroes were deployed as jingoistic propaganda in the 1940s, suggesting that these

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<sup>631</sup> Joe Simon (w), Jack Kirby (a) and Al Liederman (i), 'Meet Captain America' *Captain America* #1 (New York: Timely Comics, March 1941). While the *Captain America* film serial was produced during World War II, unlike the film in the MCU diegesis it does not depict Captain America going to war. In the serial the superhero's civilian identity is district attorney Grant Gardner (Dick Purcell), and the story pits him against British crime boss and museum curator Cyrus Maldor (Lionel Atwill), alias the Scarab, who leads a series of murders and robberies. Traces of World War II are only present through occasional inscription into the background. The most prominent of these is a propaganda poster featuring Uncle Sam and the slogan "no room for rumours" on the wall of an oil plant in chapter seven, 'Wholesale Destruction'.

<sup>632</sup> This ascription is enforced by the fact that the comic book that children and soldiers are reading in this sequence is *Captain America* #1, the famous cover clearly visible. Depicting the distribution of the comic book cover that the sequence parodically recreates emphasises the role of *Captain America* comic books in actual World War II propaganda.

<sup>633</sup> Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, p. 104.

practices used crude spectacle to misrepresent the realities of war. The complicit nature of this critique is augmented by the sequence's situation in a film that itself places the same nationalist icon in an, albeit somewhat more sincere, spectacularised and sanitised version of World War II. The film thus establishes Captain America in the MCU as a figure whose representation complicitly critiques the character's patriotic connotations.



Figure 118 Captain America punches Hitler on the cover of Captain America #1



Figure 119 Captain America punches an actor playing Hitler during a gaudy stage show in MCU *Captain America*

The kinds of textual dialogue that MCU *Captain America* opens up demonstrate that superhero films in the MCU necessitate an expansion of Jess-Cooke's notion of film sequels responding to previous films in the series. The film's intertextual reflections point outside of the continuity in which they are situated to respond to other incarnations of *Captain America*. The film's sentiments also open a dialogue with other MCU series across its textual network. For example, Steve/Captain America's unflinching patriotism can be placed in tension with Tony/Iron Man's individualistic mode of capitalism. Each character's series themselves complicate these values, with *Captain America* offering a parodic critique of World War II propaganda and the *Iron Man* series interrogating connections between the military-industrial complex and international terrorism. The associative frameworks of these two characters therefore comprise distinct sets of values riddled with contradictions that blend critique with complicity.

In MCU *Avengers*, Steve/Captain America and Tony/Iron Man are the two characters who most explicitly vocalise and debate the validity of the values with which they are associated. McSweeney demonstrates that MCU *Avengers* mediates World War II and post-9/11 perceptions of America through tensions between these two men.<sup>634</sup> The film thus presents the values that they embody as

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<sup>634</sup> McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film*, pp. 130-132.

specifically American. Steve/Captain America's values of courage and camaraderie are ascribed to the U.S. World War II effort. Tony/Iron Man's entrepreneurialism is framed as a responsible way for the U.S. to engage in post-9/11 geopolitics; Tony's wealth initially came from selling weapons to the U.S. military but, after finding his weapons in the hands of Afghan terrorists in MCU *Iron Man*, disassociated himself from the military-industrial complex to seek a more personally-accountable way to act in the U.S.'s interests. Another prominent set of values in *The Avengers* is embodied by the mysterious yet omnipresent agency S.H.I.E.L.D., who in many ways represent the post-9/11 military-industrial complex. These three sets of values parallel those that I mapped in Raimi's *Spider-Man*: the idealised communal values of a bygone era, entrepreneurial capitalism and decentred postmodern power structures.

In MCU *Avengers*, Steve's confrontation of Tony in a laboratory aboard the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier places these different values in direct tension. Steve and Tony articulate and enact their views on S.H.I.E.L.D. throughout the scene. Steve trusts S.H.I.E.L.D. and wants to follow their orders, while Tony is suspicious that the agency is hiding unscrupulous activities. Steve and Tony's division is marked out spatially when the former enters the laboratory and stands at one side of a workbench, while Tony and Bruce occupy the other [Figure 120]. Bruce's presence enforces the rift. Spanakos discusses Hulk villain Abomination as an embodiment of ways in which the military-industrial complex can pervert U.S. patriotism, and situates Abomination as a counterpoint to Captain America: both are soldiers granted superpowers by versions of the same serum.<sup>635</sup> Bruce/Hulk enters this equation by gaining superpowers through another version of the serum. Bruce/Hulk does not embrace the powers, and views the system that created them as an adversary weaponising individuals to serve its own immoral agenda. Bruce therefore complicates the spectrum of values mapped in this encounter through his powers being genetically linked to Steve's while, like Tony, opposing the military-industrial complex to which Steve exhibits loyalty.

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<sup>635</sup> Spanakos, 'Exceptional Recognition', pp. 16-17



Figure 120 A workbench separates Tony and Bruce from Steve in MCU Avengers

Robert Downey Jr.'s star persona augments the challenge that Tony poses to Steve. Downey Jr.'s widely publicised struggles against drug addiction and transitions from prosperous celebrity lifestyle to periods in rehabilitation and jail draw parallels with Tony/Iron Man's 616 continuity, chiefly the character's alcoholism and numerous losses of fortune.<sup>636</sup> Dominic Lennard explains that, even after years of sobriety, both the press and Downey Jr.'s film roles perpetuate the troubled aspects of his persona.<sup>637</sup> The cover of August 2008's *Rolling Stone*, released the same summer as MCU *Iron Man*, exemplifies this tendency, presenting Downey Jr. as a troubled figure, stubble-ridden and wearing a prison-orange hood, the headline reading "To Hell and Back With Robert Downey Jr." [Figure 121]. A cover for *Rolling Stone* in MCU *Iron Man* provides an interesting counterpart, showing Tony, confident and sharply dressed, with the headline "Tony Stark Wants to Save the World" [Figure 122]. These two

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<sup>636</sup> Tony's alcoholism was initially explored in the 'Demon in a Bottle' storyline (David Michelinie (w), John Romita Jr. (a), Bob Layton (a), et al., *The Invincible Iron Man* #120-128 (March 1979- November 1979) (repr. in Alan O'Keefe (ed.), *The Invincible Iron Man: Demon in a Bottle* (Tunbridge Wells: Panini Publishing, 2010), pp. 6-174). It would return numerous times, at one point being key factor contributing a period in which Tony lost his fortune and became homeless, which initiated in Denny O'Neil (w), Luke McDonnell (p), Steve Mitchell (i), et al., 'Firebrand's Revenge', *The Invincible Iron Man* #172 (New York: Marvel Comics, July 1983).

<sup>637</sup> Dominic Lennard, 'Wonder Boys: Matt Damon, Johnny Depp, and Robert Downey Jr.' in ed. Murray Pomerance, *Shining in Shadows: Movie Stars of the 2000s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), pp. 25-31.

covers trace a shared trajectory for both men, asserting that MCU *Iron Man* primes the fallen actor and, as described by Morrison, ‘B-list Marvel star’, to ascend to A-list status.<sup>638</sup> In MCU *Avengers*, Tony foregrounds his role as self-made success that has overcome personal adversity when, in an earlier clash with Steve/Captain America aboard the helicarrier, he boasts that he is a “genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist” while branding Steve a “laboratory experiment”. This declaration of Tony’s brand of entrepreneurial individualism asserts superiority over a superhero whose powers were bestowed on him by an external force. Chris Evans’ celebrity status underscores the contrast of Tony and Steve. Evans does not have the kind of ostentatious star persona of Downey Jr., at the time of MCU *Captain America’s* release being best known not for his personal attributes, but his role as Johnny Storm/Human Torch in *Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005) and *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (Tim Story, 2007). Downey Jr. is a star, known for his idiosyncratic persona, Evans is an actor, known for performing roles.

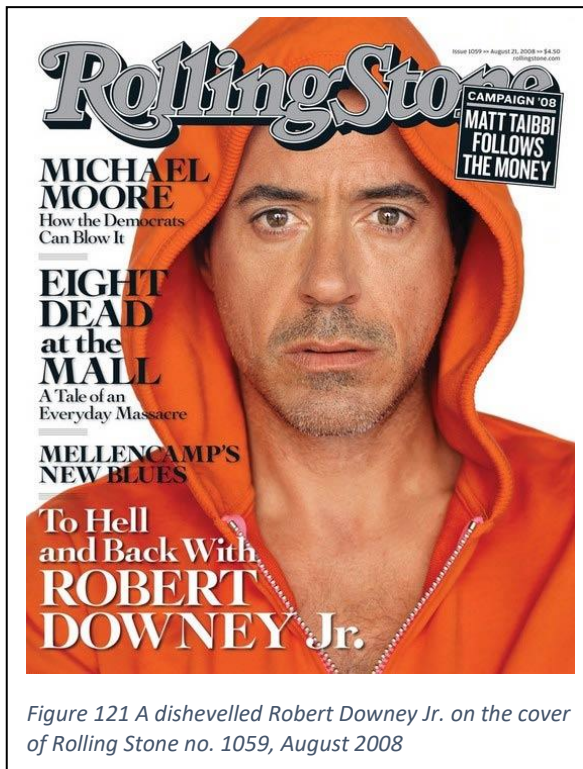


Figure 121 A dishevelled Robert Downey Jr. on the cover of Rolling Stone no. 1059, August 2008



Figure 122 A sharply dressed Tony Stark on the cover of Rolling Stone in MCU Iron Man

<sup>638</sup> Morrison, *Supergods*, p. 378.

In the laboratory scene in MCU *Avengers*, Tony exerts his sense of superiority over Steve. When Tony reveals that he is running a decryption program on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s systems he crosses over to Steve's side of the bench. The two stand directly opposite each other in confrontation, as if Tony's invasion of S.H.I.E.L.D. is a direct affront to Steve [Figure 123]. Tony's Black Sabbath t-shirt connotes his love of heavy metal, a key part of his associative framework that MCU *Iron Man* director Jon Favreau interlocks with Downey Jr.'s persona, stating that the star 'captures that bad boy attitude... That's why we open [MCU *Iron Man*] with 'Back in Black' [by AC/DC]'.<sup>639</sup> Downey Jr. and heavy metal bands Black Sabbath and AC/DC are also alike in lucratively capitalising on their anti-establishment sensibilities. Tony's attire, connoting his entrepreneurial individualism, pointedly contrasts what he mockingly dubs Steve's "spangly outfit", a variation of military uniform that symbolises Steve's staunch devotion to his country and the military that granted him his powers. Tony's casual mannerisms and condescending offers of blueberries to Steve further express his rejection of the system to which Steve's rigid upright posture exhibits loyalty. Tony's suspicions of S.H.I.E.L.D. are later validated when it is revealed that they have been developing weapons of mass destruction primed for intergalactic war. Tony's brand of entrepreneurial capitalism is thus presented as liberated and able to pose necessary challenges to the military-industrial complex, while Steve is noble if naïve, his parochial loyalty to S.H.I.E.L.D. enabling the military-industrial complex to operate unchecked.

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<sup>639</sup> Edward Douglas, 'An In-Depth Iron Man Talk with Director Jon Favreau', *Superherohype*, (2008), <<http://www.superherohype.com/features/96427-exclusive-an-in-depth-iron-man-talk-with-jon-favreau>>; quoted in Lennard, 'Wonder Boys', p. 28.





Figure 123 Steve and Tony stand directly opposite each other in confrontation in MCU *Avengers*

The complicitous critiques of U.S. hegemony and propaganda in Tony/Iron Man's and Steve/Captain America's respective solo-series are compressed into the characters themselves in MCU *Avengers*, forming more stable sets of values that can be pitted against each other. These values are then examined through being employed in a critique of the military-industrial complex. This critique develops a core thematic concern of the MCU at the expense of foregrounding certain characters over others. By negotiating the values of its team's two representatives of the U.S. (Bruce is also American but, as discussed earlier, disassociates from his country of birth by frequently seeking refuge outside of the U.S.), MCU *Avengers* grants its American characters privileged status. MCU *Avengers*' endeavours to dovetail the thematic concerns of the series that it draws together therefore performs a critique of U.S. military structures that remains complicit with U.S. hegemony.

The organisation of the character hierarchy is finalised and underscored during MCU *Avengers*' climactic battle. Staging this battle in Manhattan signifies a return home for the superhero genre. New York, allegorically or literally, is the home of many of the most famous superheroes, while often providing the site in which their creators live. As demonstrated in previous chapters, *Superman: The Movie*'s Metropolis, which is "played" by New York, is celebrated as a place of kaleidoscopic wonder,

while Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy's New York works with the superhero to maintain utopia. However, in MCU *Avengers*, New York is only ascribed as a home environment to Tony/Iron Man.<sup>640</sup> As observed earlier, Manhattan is thus interlocked with Tony's entrepreneurial capitalism.

The presentation of Manhattan in the final battle elucidates the film's sociopolitical sentiments. In Raimi's *Spider-Man* films, familiar New York architecture becomes a malleable and dynamic ally to the superhero. In MCU *Avengers*, the superheroes do interact with Manhattan's structures, but utilise these more as conduits for their own powers. For example, Hawkeye uses rooftops as vantage points, Thor turns the Chrysler Building into a lightning conductor and Hulk leaps between skyscrapers. Hulk damages these buildings upon impact, in contrast to Spider-Man's nimble encounters with skyscrapers. When buildings in Spider-Man's New York do crumble they can present the superhero with mobile platforms. In *The Avengers*, it is overlaid world elements, rather than familiar Primary World structures, that have dynamic qualities. The S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier also functions as a boat and, through being covered with panels that broadcast images of the sky, can effectively turn invisible. More pertinently, Stark Tower is a technologically advanced structure that, for example, features walkways from which mechanical arms protrude to remove Tony/Iron Man's exoskeleton. Very long shots of Manhattan in the final battle situate Stark Tower centrally [Figure 124], motivated by its key narrative function of providing the contested site that Loki has transformed into a transmitter that opens a portal to another world. The digitally rendered tower perceptually realistically integrates into Manhattan, its glass surfaces reflecting the surrounding buildings, yet its architecture is pointedly strange, a hollowed cone amidst modernity's rectangular prisms. Stark Tower's central role and futuristic qualities present entrepreneurial capitalism as able to, if not hijacked by nefarious forces,

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<sup>640</sup> New York does feature in MCU *Incredible Hulk* and *Captain America*. However, for Bruce/Hulk it represents a turbulent space in which his destructive battle with Abomination is staged. This turbulence is in opposition to the relative tranquillity Bruce/Hulk finds in the Rio de Janeiro favela. Gilmore astutely notes that the favela lacks the ordered layout of New York, making it harder for the military to navigate ('Will You Like Me When I'm Angry?', pp. 21-22). New York's submersion in U.S. structures of government surveillance and control therefore heightens the threat it poses to Bruce/Hulk's wellbeing. Meanwhile, Steve/Captain America is associated with a bygone New York. At the end of *Captain America*, his dislocation from contemporary New York is emphasised by the intense sense of alienation created as he escapes from the building in which he is recovering and finds himself in Times Square, the symbolic heart of corporate America.

transform human existence for the better. The tower's semi-destruction in the final battle initiates its own transformation into Avenger Tower. Whereas in Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy the combined effort of community, superhero and city maintains utopia, in *The Avengers* Tony's enterprise accommodates and sustains a team of superheroes who can protect humanity.



Figure 124 Stark Tower provides the focal point of Manhattan in MCU Avengers

The Avengers' bodies provide the means through which the team members are interlaced and placed in relation to one another in an elaborate long take. The shot begins with Black Widow's profilmic body having hijacked a Chitauri's digitally rendered aircraft. Flying from frame left to right, Black Widow is overtaken by Iron Man's digitally rendered armoured body, the first exchange in a relay. Iron Man flies toward Captain America's typically profilmic body that is, at this moment, constructed from CGI that enables him to perform superhumanly agile kicks on Chitauri. Iron Man momentarily lands and fires a repulsor beam for Captain America to deflect toward the Chitauri with his shield, this joint attack exhibiting the two superheroes' reconciliation. Iron Man then flies upward to Hawkeye's profilmic body, which is perched on a roof and fires a digitally rendered arrow. The camera follows the arrow, and is led to Hulk. Thor joins Hulk as they battle Chitauri together, the digital crackle emitting from Mjolnir bridging the representational gap between the Thor's profilmic and Hulk's digital bodies. This

digitally composited shot that exhibits hybrid indexicality cultivates points of intersection between the characters' bodies. Each body possesses some trace CGI, even if just part of a weapon they fire, facilitating smooth transitions between the profilmic and the digital throughout the shot. A general progression emerges from vulnerable to seemingly invulnerable bodies, Black Widow's fragile feminine body initiating the relay that ends with Thor's supernatural and Hulk's hard hypermasculine bodies. As the superhero who diegetically represents technological modification of the human body, it is significant that Iron Man links Black Widow's, Captain America's and Hawkeye's vulnerable human (albeit in Captain America's case biologically modified) bodies. The entrepreneurial capitalist's technology is presented as the adhesive that unifies the troops who had previously taken orders from the film's untrustworthy representative of the military-industrial complex, S.H.I.E.L.D..

The long take metamorphoses a comic book trope in which superhero teams take up a large amount of space on the page in single images. Presenting complete superhero teams in single panels, as evident in the last panel of *The Avengers* #1, evolved into a popular trope of team comics and crossover events: splash pages that depict each hero in detail during battle. For example, a double splash page from *Secret Invasion* #6 depicts an array of Marvel's heroes advancing from the right of the page, battling invading aliens Skrulls [Figure 125]<sup>641</sup>. Extending this detailed image over two pages emphasises the battle's scale, comparable to the wraparound cover of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #1 discussed earlier.<sup>642</sup> The double splash page's destabilisation of symmetry distinguishes it from the balanced representation of superhero vs superhero battles. Having the superheroes significantly encroach on the Skrull's side of the page presents them as an overwhelming force when united. However, imbalance is also evident within the team. Some of Marvel's most prominent superheroes – Captain America, Iron Man and Spider-Man – have central positions in the composition. MCU

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<sup>641</sup> Brian Michael Bendis (w), Leinil Francis Yu (p), Mark Morales (i), et al., *Secret Invasion* #6 (New York: Marvel Comics, November 2008).

<sup>642</sup> *The Ultimates* 2 #13 epitomises the practice of emphasising scope and spectacle through the very literal means of having a single panel taking up the physical space of multiple pages. The comic features a section that extends the physical space of the comic book beyond its two-page limit by folding out, until it is eight pages in width, to depict the heroes fighting a horde of demons in one sweeping image. Mark Millar (w), Bryan Hitch (p), Paul Neary (i), et al., 'Independence Day', *The Ultimates* 2 #13 (New York: Marvel Comics, February 2007).

*Avengers'* long take performs the function of ensemble splash pages: emphasising the battle's scope, presenting the team as a united force while maintaining a character hierarchy. The shot also metamorphoses the means through which certain superheroes are favoured over others. A comics panel, no matter what size, offers a fixed perspective. Figures can be placed centrally and in the foreground, or sidelined and in the background, within these still compositions. Single takes in films can change perspectives and move through environments. The camera's mobility means that superheroes do not need to feature in one image to share the same shot, while character movement and the progression through environments allows certain characters to occupy more space than others. In the shot from MCU *Avengers*, each character is situated in a certain kind of space, which can be generalised as either ground or sky, apart from Iron Man, whose superior role is evident in how he traverses, and attacks Chitauri from, both ground and sky. Film's temporal properties are also used to foreground Iron Man, who features in the shot for longer than any other character. While rhythmic editing in the earlier battle between Iron Man and Thor presented the two as equals, this mobile ensemble shot favours Iron Man and affirms his place at the top of the character hierarchy.

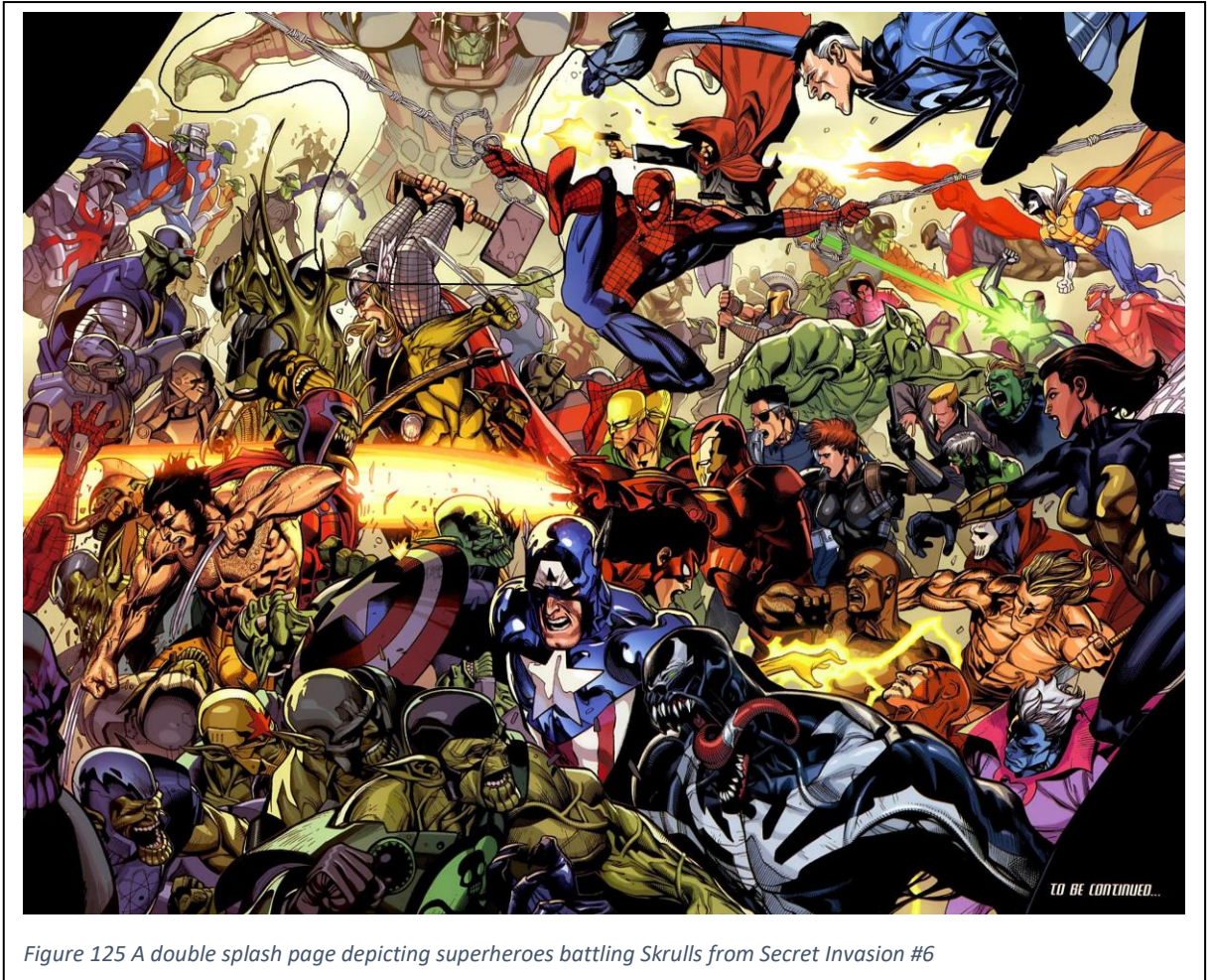


Figure 125 A double splash page depicting superheroes battling Skrulls from Secret Invasion #6

MCU *Avengers'* long take also develops the superhero blockbuster trope of following superheroes' aerial movements in fluid takes. As with shots from *Superman: The Movie* and Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy that track superheroes moving through cityscapes, MCU *Avengers'* long take metamorphoses primarily spatial techniques found in comics by emphasising cinema's spatiotemporal properties in a continuous take that showcases different kinds of movement. Rather than following lone heroes and emphasising their bond with the city through complimentary kinesis, *The Avengers* transitions smoothly between teammates, underscoring their relations with one another. Unlike Superman's and Spider-Man's respective bonds with Metropolis and New York, the Avengers' movements present them not as equivalents, but situate them on a hierarchy. Seamless motion creates the abstract feeling of utopia that Dyer identifies in musicals, while the team's fluid navigation of streets and skies enacts Bukatman's conceptualisation of movement as utopia in superhero narratives, both discussed in my

first chapter. However, the specific qualities and prominence of particular bodies present the technology and mentality that Tony/Iron Man brings to the team as fundamental to this utopia. Tony/Iron Man's technology grants him power equivalent to that of a Norse god and elevates humanity, providing the means to unify the disparate parts of the universe that the characters represent into a utopia that is embodied by the totemic image of Stark/Avengers Tower.

While Tony/Iron Man's entrepreneurial capitalism is championed, Steve/Captain America's values of World War II camaraderie are not dismissed in the final battle. Steve/Captain America's sense of community manifests in his roles as strategist, delegating tasks to each Avenger, and protector of Manhattan's citizenry. After saving a bank full of civilians, and taking a direct blow from an alien grenade in the process, Steve/Captain America is shown in mid-shot gazing despondently at the destruction around him [Figure 126], mournful music bolstering the call for audience empathy. Steve/Captain America's mood, along with the dust that covers his patriotic costume and the bloody cut on his upper arm, reveal that, out of all the Avengers, his body has undergone the most dramatic shift in status through being situated alongside the other superheroes. Whereas in MCU *Captain America* his was the superior male body, in the twenty-first century when technological exoskeletons enable men to ascend to rank alongside gods, Steve's human physique is consigned to the vulnerable end of the bodily spectrum. The fragility of Steve/Captain America's body in this context shows his values as under threat in a post-9/11 world where terror can rain from Manhattan's sky. While Hulk's invulnerable hypermasculine body is presented as a necessary force for countering unfathomable alien enemies and the machinations of their duplicitous commander, Captain America's wounded body represents a fragile ideal that needs defending in this climate.



*Figure 126 Steve/Captain America gazes despondently at the destruction around him in MCU Avengers*

Steve/Captain America's values resurface in the battle's decisive move. On the helicarrier, Steve accuses Tony of only fighting for himself, and not being "the guy to make the sacrifice play". In the final battle, Iron Man performs exactly this kind of selfless act when carrying a nuclear missile, which S.H.I.E.L.D. launched to defeat the Chitauri at the expense of destroying Manhattan, into a portal that leads to the Chitauri mothership. Thor's equivalent power of flight and additional invulnerability would have enabled him to perform this task without the risk of death, but having the American entrepreneur's mortal body take the missile through the portal bolsters the moment's dramatic effect while reframing his values. For McSweeney, this moment shows 'a new generation of hero embodying the spirit of the 'Greatest Generation''.<sup>643</sup> By embodying Steve's values, Tony assimilates them into his own values. This move ascribes qualities of camaraderie, courage and self-sacrifice to entrepreneurial capitalism. Furthermore, these values, which in Steve become fragile, are presented as rejuvenated and strengthened by Tony/Iron Man's technology. The protective exoskeleton, along with the aid of hypermasculine Hulk who catches Tony/Iron Man's unconscious body after the nuclear explosion,

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<sup>643</sup> McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film*, pp. 131-132.



ensures that although Tony/Iron Man makes “the sacrifice play”, he survives, underscoring his transcendence to the status of immortal god.

Combining the two sets of U.S. values within the figure of Tony/Iron Man thwarts S.H.I.E.L.D.’s callous plan to destroy Manhattan, again championing Steve’s and Tony’s values over the military-industrial complex. However, this final critique of the military-industrial complex implicitly presents S.H.I.E.L.D.’s nuclear missile as key to the Avengers’ victory. Foregrounding Steve/Captain America’s values in this scene causes the missile to recall an aspect of the U.S. World War II effort that Steve/Captain America’s associative framework attempts to conceal; the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The combination of Steve/Captain America’s and Tony/Iron Man’s values therefore correspondingly maps the modes of thinking behind the U.S. World War II effort onto the post-9/11 U.S.. If Tony’s technology is celebrated as the means to protect and maintain noble U.S. values, the nuclear weapon, another technology of war that has been deployed to protect these values in the past, is implicated in this celebration. Deployment of extreme force is presented as a deplorable but necessary way to retain U.S. values. The film’s critique of the military-industrial complex is thus complicit in the way Steve/Captain America’s and Tony/Iron Man’s values are interlaced with S.H.I.E.L.D.’s strategies. MCU *Avenger’s* endeavours to compress characters’ associative frameworks into their bodies and then unify these frameworks in single gestures renders the gestures profoundly equivocal.

### Conclusion

This chapter has explored the extent to which the approach that has been developed throughout my thesis requires reconfiguration when analysing the MCU’s networked multi-series diegesis. I have demonstrated the kinds of analysis that must be undertaken for an aesthetic appreciation of the MCU as a whole, and individual films within this network. While in many ways MCU texts partake in the adaptive practices of other superhero blockbusters, the nature of the MCU’s networked multi-series diegesis engenders transformation of certain strategies, which were elucidated through close analysis of MCU *Avengers*.

The model of a networked multi-series diegesis that Marvel Studios are pioneering in blockbuster cinema is adapted from comic books, in which it has been undertaken and refined for decades. In comic books, team narratives provide a key site at which the diegesis is managed. The strategies through which this management is undertaken involve dichotomous strategies of showcasing expansiveness while performing compression, and mapping a hierarchical organisation of texts and characters.

The MCU adapts the structure and principles of superhero comic book universes to facilitate its continued expansion. This maintains a hierarchical organisation and erects a media hierarchy. Whereas previous superhero films deploy stylistic devices that assert the superiority of film over other media that have been used in their respective textual matrices, the MCU also uses narrational strategies to elevate film texts over texts in other media within its diegesis. This management of the diegetic universe extends to managing its situation in relation to other versions of the Marvel universe. Similarly to how other superhero films make a bid for centrality in their respective textual matrices, the MCU pushes its universe to the centre of the Marvel multiverse. When analysing the MCU, the model of a matrix must therefore be expanded to one of a multiverse. While texts bid for centrality in a matrix by arranging the intertextual framework around them, the MCU distinguishes its universe by foregrounding the qualities of its diegetic interconnectivity. However, despite this emphasis on interconnections between texts within the diegetic universe, character matrices continue to be organised and harnessed to stabilise the expansion and at times fractured development of the MCU. For example, even though MCU *Incredible Hulk* acts in many ways as a reboot, it does not completely negate previous filmic incarnations of *Hulk*, but rather relies on audience familiarity with these and other texts from the *Hulk* matrix, compressing elements of these texts into its narrative so that it can forego a lengthy origin story.

MCU films do not just compress elements from character matrices, but also from elsewhere in the fictional universe. *The Avengers* narrows the individual spectrums of characters who have previously

been established in other MCU films, so that each character has a relatively stable set of distinct traits. These traits are conveyed by deploying elements of a character's associative framework: a group of reference points informed by the kinds of spaces and genres that they typically inhabit. A character's associative framework is constructed within the universe through repurposing elements of their matrix. Introductory scenes in *The Avengers* compress the genre fractals and other components of characters' associative frameworks into spaces, individual pieces of mise-en-scène, and the characters' bodies. The emphasis placed on characters' bodies performing and being presented in ways familiar from previous films causes these bodies to be principal communicators of the characters' defining features. This strategy enables the characters to continue embodying their associative frameworks once occupying neutral spaces. When characters are placed in antagonistic encounters with one another, the abstract, perceptually realistic and conceptual qualities of their bodies' form and movements contribute to the mapping of points of comparison and disjunction. Doing so interlaces the distinct aspects of the universe that the characters represent, while celebrating the universe's heterogeneity. Yet the relations that are mapped are not harmonious; the film favours certain characteristics and powers over others. Through reading across characters' antagonistic encounters, another hierarchy emerges, this time providing the model through which the film manages its multiplicity of character roles and places them in relation to one another.

The criteria that govern *The Avengers'* character hierarchy have sociopolitical significance, issues of gender and nationality emerging as key determining factors. The sets of values that the film foregrounds are interrogated in other MCU films released prior to *The Avengers*. These other films offer complicitous critiques that are often directed at the U.S. military, and are complicated when the films' sociopolitical commentaries are read in relation to one another. Whereas superhero films typically reflect on adapted sources, and sequels on previous films in a series, the MCU's networked structure facilitates the negotiation of values between parallel and intersecting series in a shared universe. In keeping with *The Avengers'* endeavours to contain the universe's breadth, in the team film these different values are compressed into, exchanged between, and factored into a hierarchy that

manages the characters. The film's conceptualisation of utopia emerges through these strategies. In *The Avengers'* utopia, the consolidation of diverse people into a unified peacekeeping force is enabled by the mentality and technologies of entrepreneurial capitalist Tony/Iron Man. By compressing and combining different sets of values to attain this formulation, the film does not trim them of the equivocal sentiments accumulated in previous films. Rather, the compounds of values that emerge are volatile, provoking more instances of complicitous critique.

Various criteria that inform *The Avengers'* character hierarchy coalesce to situate Tony/Iron Man firmly at the top, and thus celebrate his brand of entrepreneurial capitalism. Tony/Iron Man is the surrogate for the MCU audience as he views the other superheroes on holoscreens, he occupies and overlays the city that is central to the superhero genre, he is the savior of the world, he reconciles past and present U.S. values, and he is played by the film's biggest star. The only quality that the film favours for which Tony/Iron Man does not exhibit superiority is physical strength, his unarmoured body being less muscular than Hulk's, Thor's and Captain America's. Interestingly, Tony/Iron Man's elevation of himself over these other characters through posturing draws parallels with Loki. At one moment Tony acknowledges this link, realising that Loki covets Stark Tower due to its ostentatious assertion of an individual's superiority. Linking Tony's mentality with the arrogance that drives Loki's villainy is the sole critique the film provides of Tony's entrepreneurial capitalism. However, the scene in which Tony and Loki meet in Stark Tower just before the climactic battle, effectively as leaders of the opposed forces, presents Tony's attitude as more stable than Loki's. Loki loses his composure when, upon his failed attempt to mind-control the entrepreneur, Tony taunts the god. Face trembling in rage, Loki grabs Tony by the neck and hurls him out of a window. Having prepared for this eventuality by wearing bracelets that attract his armour, Tony is caught mid-fall by the Iron Man exoskeleton. In this moment, Loki's resort to physical violence is presented as a failure on his part, while Tony's boastful provocations and technology enable his victory. Tony's godlike status is therefore asserted not just through possessing powers comparable to Thor's, but also by him triumphing over Loki in a battle of

wits. It is the technologies and sensibility of Tony's entrepreneurial capitalism that grant him these qualities that are presented as elevating humanity.

Superhero blockbusters have always situated themselves in networks of coexisting, but unequal, texts. The MCU manifests these qualities within its fictional universe, constructing a networked diegesis in which characters frequently vie for supremacy. The MCU's strategies of universe construction and management, and the modes of reading upon which these depend, adapt practices of superhero comic book universes, which encourage fans to construe synchronous and comparative relations between texts and characters. Understanding the ways in which MCU films elicit and guide trans-textual modes of reading is vital to interpreting the MCU as it continues to expand and introduce new formations of superheroes to cinema screens.

## Conclusion

Mark Gray (Joe Seely) lies in his room surrounded by comic books, including issues of *The Spectacular Spider-Man*, *The Avengers* and *The Uncanny X-Men*. Upon being sucked into the pages of a comic titled *Nightmares From Hell*, Mark finds himself in a space in which a monochrome palette represents black ink on white paper, while crisscrossing shelves and beams form geometric shapes that recall comic book panels [Figure 127]. Cinematic bogeyman Freddy Kruger (Robert Englund) pursues Mark through this space, eventually manifesting a square chest that sports an image of a lightning bolt [Figure 128], and declaring “Faster than a bastard maniac! More powerful than a local madman! It’s Super-Freddy!” As Freddy gouges his victim, Mark turns into a sheet of paper and is cut to shreds. This scene from *Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* (Stephen Hopkins, 1989), released the same year as Tim Burton’s *Batman*, demonstrates that even at an early stage in the superhero blockbuster’s development, the genre’s tropes were familiar enough to be deployed in other films. While *Superman: The Movie* harnesses points of overlap between established Hollywood genres and superhero conventions to facilitate Superman’s transition to blockbuster film, *Nightmare on Elm Street 5* reciprocates by exploiting the superhero and horror genres’ shared concern with staging fantastical battles between good and evil. Freddy torments Mark in a *mise-en-scène* that remediates comics. In addition, his appearance and rearticulation of *Superman’s* famous worded identifier underscore how the superhero genre is connoted by imagery, iconography and words, many of which gesture to the medium of comics. Audiences are directed not just outside of the text, but outside of cinema, to understand and appreciate the film’s strategies.



*Figure 127 Mark finds himself in a space that mediates comics in Nightmare on Elm Street 5*



*Figure 128 Freddy Krueger takes the form of a superhero in Nightmare on Elm Street 5*

Two decades later, in the twenty-first century, the superhero genre has risen to a new prominence in Hollywood, but has not cast off its comic book roots. Although Martin Zeller-Jacques argues that, in this contemporary climate, superhero adaptations are '[n]o longer tied to the comic-book medium which initially brought them to a mass audience, they circulate with increasing freedom, and at most,

a selective eye for their “original” predecessors’, my analysis has shown otherwise.<sup>644</sup> The films may not make attempts to faithfully adapt stories from comic books, but assert their relations to this “source” medium by metamorphosing superhero comic books’ style and form, while adapting superhero comic books’ strategies for managing textual networks. Through doing so, the superhero blockbuster develops its own set of tropes, yet these maintain dialogue with, and evolve alongside, comic book aesthetics. The approach that I have developed and deployed across this thesis illuminates the central role of style and form in managing the textual networks that superhero texts construct both within and between diegeses. Understanding how superhero blockbusters organise and situate themselves within these networks of texts from different media and eras is vital when interrogating the films’ adaptive strategies, style and meanings.

### Champions of New Hollywood

While I have illuminated the intertextual functions and meanings of superhero blockbusters’ aesthetics of adaptation by separating aesthetics from concerns of industry, my analysis facilitates a broader understanding of the New Hollywood blockbuster paradigm’s development and organisation. The textual strategies that the superhero blockbuster has employed in its ascent to Hollywood dominance refine and contribute to the development of the New Hollywood blockbuster’s franchise system.

The ways in which superhero blockbusters constantly direct audiences to texts featuring the same characters and/or universes within carefully managed textual networks exemplify practices of media franchising, and hone these practices in cinema. As the twenty-first century superhero blockbuster boom continues and accelerates in the 2010s, the MCU has set up a new model for film franchises that has influenced rival studios’ superhero blockbusters and blockbuster production more generally. For example, DC Comics have established their own cinematic universe, dubbed the DC Entertainment Universe (DCEU), which at the time of writing comprises *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013), *Batman v Superman* and *Suicide Squad* (David Ayer, 2016), with more feature films in production and under

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<sup>644</sup> Zeller-Jacques, ‘Adapting the X-Men’, p. 156.



development. Outside of the superhero genre, non-superhero cinematic universes currently under development include one that combines the *Godzilla* and *King Kong* franchises, one comprising the horror icons to which Universal Studios owns the cinematic rights (including *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *Wolf Man*), and one featuring characters made of LEGO.<sup>645</sup> Most prominently, the *Star Wars* franchise's continuity has been restructured around a network of films to be released annually, beginning with *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (J.J. Abrams, 2015). Prior to this restructuring, the *Star Wars* franchise was officially arranged in a hierarchy of media, with films on the top, demonstrating the use of hierarchies to manage texts throughout the history of media franchising.<sup>646</sup> However, after the restructure, echoing the MCU, *Star Wars* films are also arranged hierarchically: some are "main series" while others are tie-in stories, the former being hierarchically superior. My analysis of the MCU's strategies of universe and multiverse management provides tools to examine the ways in which Hollywood's new multi-series networked diegeses are organised as they adapt, reboot and expand universes.

The move toward managing and foregrounding relations between texts in a franchise modifies intertextual practices that have always existed in Hollywood. Thomas Schatz explains that, in the studio era, studios had 'distinctive styles and signature moments, involving different stars and story types and a different "way of seeing" in both a technical and ideological sense'.<sup>647</sup> In studio-era Hollywood, films were not presented as discrete objects: stylistic strategies, stars and particular narrative formations placed them amongst intertexts. While contracts bound stars to studios, and studios often favoured

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<sup>645</sup> There are numerous journalistic articles that provide more details about these and other under-development cinematic universes. Examples include Danilo Castro, '12 Cinematic Universes Currently in Development', *Screen Rant* (2016) <<http://screenrant.com/upcoming-cinematic-universes/?view=all>>, accessed 20 November 2016; and Kevin Lincoln, 'A Guide to the Expanding Universe of Hollywood's Cinematic Universes', *Vulture* (2016) <<http://www.vulture.com/2016/04/guide-to-the-explosion-of-cinematic-universes.html>>, accessed 20 November 2016.

<sup>646</sup> For example, Wolf outlines how the *Star Wars* franchise (prior to the restructure after Disney acquired the rights to the franchise in 2012) was separated into five levels of canonicity in the official database. The top level included the films and their novelisations, while texts such as television series and role-playing games occupied lower levels. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, p. 271.

<sup>647</sup> Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Film-making in the Studio Era* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 6.

particular genres, genres were by no means unique to studios, or even cinema. Identifying a film by a particular genre placed it in a malleable network of texts not controlled by a single agent, such as a studio. Intertextuality in the studio-era was thus managed within studios through structures such as the star system, while a studio's group of texts was simultaneously interlaced with other textual groupings that were formed across studios. This process engendered complex and fluid textual networks. Once the infrastructure of the studio system was dismantled, studios lost their hold on the assets and contracted talent that facilitated the interlinking of their films. Studios in New Hollywood constructed new intertextual networks by licensing intellectual property instead of contracting talent, each property forming a franchise that carries its own set of expectations.<sup>648</sup> The difference between a franchise's textual network and those constructed by studios in the studio era is that, in a specific franchise, all of the texts, and corresponding merchandise, concern the same intellectual property. Thus, the forms of intertextuality mobilised by Hollywood shift as blockbusters promote intertextual networks that are primarily governed by characters and universes. This change is exemplified by superhero blockbusters featuring Marvel and DC characters, in which the intellectual property can be conceptualised as either a specific character matrix or, for a cinematic universe, the Marvel or DC multiverse.

My analysis has demonstrated that stars continue to contribute to the organisation of intertextual networks under the New Hollywood blockbuster franchise system. This finding is contrary to common claims that what constitutes a star has fundamentally changed in New Hollywood, encapsulated by Kristin Thompson's assertion that 'today the franchise is often the star'.<sup>649</sup> Thompson's analogy

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<sup>648</sup> For a history and examination of franchising, see Johnson, *Media Franchising*. Johnson traces how the term first entered the cultural imaginary in the 1950s, denoting a retail practice whereby an owning company, or franchisor, licences out a brand name and resources to produce a set of products to franchisees, a prolific example being McDonalds (pp. 34-41). The concept of media franchising emerged in the early 1990s as a cultural construct spurred by post-Fordist deregulation, new media platforms facilitating a multiplication of content, changes in the social character of media consumption, and media industries taking on the strategies of retail franchising (pp. 4-6).

<sup>649</sup> Kristin Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 6. Similarly, Henderson and Wolf discuss fictional characters and imaginary worlds, respectively, functioning as stars. Henderson, *The Hollywood Sequel*, pp. 141-142; Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, pp. 135-136

transfers the quality of stardom to franchises, and suggests that the franchise itself becomes the main point of attraction for cinema audiences. Burke argues that within this system the functions of the star performer are relocated: 'comic book and other franchise characters have come to supplant the role traditionally occupied by stars'.<sup>650</sup> To support this claim, Burke surveys covers from *Empire* in the 1990s and 2000s. In the 1990s, 53 out of 119 cover images were of a movie star rather than a character. In the 2000s, 84 out of 120 were characters, while only 18 were movie stars.<sup>651</sup> Yet my analysis has demonstrated that, in New Hollywood blockbuster franchises, stars do not simply become secondary to franchises in which they are cast and have their personas subsumed by the characters they play. Rather, stars' personas contribute to the identity of the franchise and characters. This was as true in 1978, when Brando's presence imbued the *Superman* franchise and character of Jor-El with gravitas, as it was in 2012, when Downey Jr.'s entrepreneurial individualism complemented Tony/Iron Man's.

While not subverting the traditional functions of stars, superhero blockbusters do offer new processes through which actors become stars. For *Superman: The Movie*, unknown actor Reeve was selected to play Clark/Superman, ensuring that a star persona would not dwarf the character. Despite this foregrounding of character over actor, the nuances of Reeve's performance, from gestures to intonation, were instrumental to distinguishing the film's incarnation of Clark/Superman from others on the character's spectrum. Through returning to the role of Clark/Superman in sequels, in which he continued his idiosyncratic performance, Reeve's growing stardom was interlaced with the character. While Reeve is most remembered for his role as Clark/Superman, the performer reciprocally left his own imprint on the franchise. This imprint is evident in *Superman: The Movie's* tagline, "you will believe a man can fly", becoming a worded identifier that has shifted through the *Superman* matrix, but remaining anchored in Reeve's representation of Clark/Superman. For example, the dedication in the trade collection of comic book *Kingdom Come* reads "Dedicated to Christopher Reeve who makes us

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<sup>650</sup> Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, p. 68.

<sup>651</sup> Many of these characters were superheroes.

believe that a man can fly".<sup>652</sup> *Kingdom Come's* narrative, which concerns a future in which DC's superheroes have aged and find themselves faced with a new breed of morally bankrupt superheroes, imbues the worded identifier with a new resonance. The flight to which it refers is also a metaphor for the inspiring nature of Reeve's humanitarian work, which he undertook after being paralysed.<sup>653</sup> *Kingdom Come's* dedication draws Reeve's wholesome, mild-mannered representation of Clark/Superman back to a position of centrality in the *Superman* matrix. Superhero blockbusters thus demonstrate that, in the New Hollywood franchise system, a reciprocal relationship can exist between star and franchise, in which a star can be formed by a franchise while their persona and performance shape the franchise.

The model of a spectrum that I have deployed illuminates the influence an actor or star has on a superhero. A superhero's characterisation shifts from text to text on a spectrum of roles on which their civilian and superhero identities are repositioned in relation to another. Performers that play superheroes contribute to this spectrum. Similarly to the dynamic nature of superheroes' spectrums, the influence a performer has on a character's spectrum can be different from text to text or franchise to franchise. For example, in Raimi's *Spider-Man* films Maguire's boyish innocence informs his performance as Peter and underscores Peter's reversal in *Spider-Man 3* by providing a stark contrast to Peter's newfound narcissism. Elsewhere, the MCU factors the status of actors and stars not just into character spectrums, but also into character hierarchies, for instance pitting the relative celebrity status of Downey Jr. and Evans against one another in Tony/Iron Man's and Steve/Captain America's clashes. Regardless of the degree to which a star or actor's persona is foregrounded, the specifics of their performance must be appreciated when examining how superheroes are situated in relation to other incarnations in a textual matrix and other characters in a universe. My analysis of superhero

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<sup>652</sup> Mark Waid (w) and Alex Ross (a), *Kingdom Come* (New York: DC Comics, 2008).

<sup>653</sup> For a discussion of Reeve's humanitarian work, see Di Paolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes*, pp. 141-144.

blockbusters therefore demonstrates that, in some of the biggest New Hollywood franchises, actors and stars are not simply subsumed by characters.

The incorporation of the star system into New Hollywood's franchise system is evident in the practice of contracting actors to franchises rather than studios. Significantly, Henderson asserts that *Superman: The Movie* set the precedence for these contracts, since the 'multi-film approach to *Superman* (and the contractual necessities that went with it) helped establish a template for blockbuster production generally, and for comic-book adaptations in particular; albeit one which took many years to become standard practice'.<sup>654</sup> Marvel Studios have pursued and honed this strategy more than any other studio, contracting MCU stars for up to nine films and making contracts appealing by including 'pay increases for subsequent films and bonuses should those films hit certain financial targets'.<sup>655</sup> Marvel Studios is therefore able to sustain constant production of instalments through adapting practices of the studio system. Meanwhile, contracted performers maintain a presence on cinema screens, enabling their stardom to develop and interlace with franchises. New Hollywood's franchise system thus supports, and is supported by, a reconfigured version of the studio era's star system.

The superhero blockbuster also harnesses the intertextual functions of genre. This thesis has demonstrated that superhero blockbusters exhibit the New Hollywood blockbuster's proclivity for genre hybridity, but do so in ways that manage character and textual multiplicities. For example, in *Superman: The Movie* different genre conventions are deployed in specific scenes and spaces to emphasise different qualities of Clark/Superman. Elsewhere, the MCU partners characters and series with different genre fractals in effort to foster a heterogeneous universe. In both *Superman: The Movie* and the MCU, points of intersection between the various genres' conventions are harnessed to harmonise characters' pluralities and the spectrum of natural to supernatural elements of which the universe comprises, respectively. Genre's traditional role in creating groups of texts that can be read

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<sup>654</sup> Henderson, *The Hollywood Sequel*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

in relation to one another and differentiated from other texts is therefore reconfigured in a system in which characters and universes perform these functions. In superhero blockbusters, genre conventions are deployed to offer familiar points of reference that map distinguishing features of characters and worlds. Meanwhile, overlapping traits of genres hold together diverse elements within a franchise.

The superhero blockbuster's mode of address typically demands audience knowledge of textual networks pertaining to specific characters and worlds, but combines this with reconfigured forms of the studio-era modes of intertextuality. Examining the adaptive strategies of superhero blockbusters illuminates the means through which the films manage textual networks, and incorporate stars and genre into this process. At a time in which superhero blockbusters perform an increasing role in sustaining and developing the New Hollywood blockbuster's franchise system, an appreciation of the superhero blockbuster's aesthetics of adaptation provides a key to understanding the ways in which Hollywood cinema is maintaining its supremacy in the shifting landscape of twenty-first century media.

### The Immortal Hollywood Superhero

The superhero blockbuster boom showed no sign of waning in 2016, which saw the release of six blockbuster adaptations of superhero comic books: (in order of release) *Deadpool* (Tim Miller), *Batman v Superman*, *Captain America: Civil War*, *X-Men Apocalypse* (Bryan Singer), *Suicide Squad* and *Doctor Strange*. These films present a range of approaches and narrative formations, from the emulation of comic book crossover event structures (*Civil War*), to the realisation of a supervillain team (*Suicide Squad*), and the infusion of explicit content and self-parody (*Deadpool*). Each of these films, besides *Doctor Strange*, feature new versions of characters who have previously been realised in other superhero blockbusters.<sup>656</sup> Character matrices thus continue to grow and to be rearranged.

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<sup>656</sup> *Deadpool* features Piotr Rasputin/Colossus (Stefan Kapicic), who has previously featured in the *X-Men* film series, in which he is played by Daniel Cudmore. The title characters of *Batman v Superman* have between them previously featured in twelve blockbuster films in other diegetic universes. *Suicide Squad* features Joker (Jared Leto), who has two previous incarnations in blockbusters. *Civil War* features Spider-Man (Tom Holland), who has two previous incarnations in blockbusters. Many of the characters in *Apocalypse*, including Jean Grey (Sophie Turner) and Scott Summers (Tye Sheridan), are new versions of characters who have previously featured in a different timeline in the *X-Men* film series.

Meanwhile, universes are (re)built and maintained. *Civil War* and *Doctor Strange* expand the MCU, *Batman v Superman* and *Suicide Squad* are the second and third entries to the DCEU, *Apocalypse* is the sixth instalment in the longest-running superhero film series, and *Deadpool* is set in another version of the universe that the X-Men inhabit. My three chapters have demonstrated that the theoretical approach I have developed is both pliable and incisive, facilitating the examination of new trends and narrative formations in the superhero blockbuster. Applying my analytical tools to a short analysis of *Batman v Superman*, the film through which this thesis was introduced, allows me to summarise the key tropes, thematic concerns and strategies that I have identified, which the superhero blockbuster continues to exhibit and metamorphose.

The only film to previously be set in the DCEU, *Man of Steel*, rebooted the *Superman* film series and in the process rearranged the *Superman* matrix. In *Man of Steel*, when Superman (Henry Cavill) first learns to fly, he builds momentum through a series of giant leaps before taking off fully. This progression condenses into a single scene the early history of Superman's powers, which initially only granted him the ability to leap an eighth of a mile and, over the course of years, developed into full-flight. Despite *Man of Steel's* desire to narratively and tonally negate all previous *Superman* films, once Superman achieves flight he is presented in a recreation of the head-on propulsion motif from *Superman: The Movie* [Figure 129]. This scene therefore tracks the development of Superman from comic books to blockbuster film, compressing this history into one flowing movement, and deploys a key trope through which superhero blockbusters present superheroes traversing space. While mapping the *Superman* matrix, the scene also exhibits the superhero blockbuster's tendency to bid for centrality in this textual network, which interlinks with the efforts of Hollywood special effects to trump their predecessors. Cavill's Superman is propelled toward the screen with greater speed than Reeve's elegant gliding, his frantically waving cape and the shaking camera asserting the moment's intensity. The film is also available in 3D versions, which augment the head-on propulsion motif's function of showcasing the depth of cinematic space. The ways in which stereoscopic presentation modifies superhero cinema's metamorphosis of comic book strategies is a significant area of

exploration that requires analysis. Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated that my approach can be reconfigured to analyse new technologies and trends that impact superhero blockbusters. Although MCU *Avengers* is available in 3D versions, I opted not to examine this feature in order to fully explore the new model of cinematic seriality that the MCU is in the process of pioneering. It is my hope that future research will develop my approach further through examining the effect of stereoscopic presentation, and other important developments, on the aesthetics of superhero blockbusters' adaptive practices.

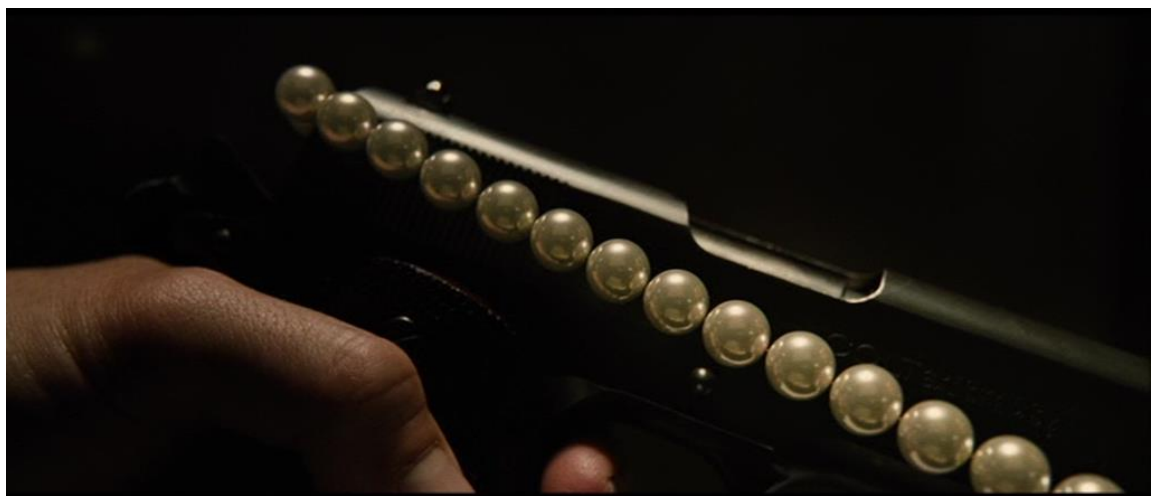


Figure 129 Superman flies head-on toward the camera in *Man of Steel*

*Batman v Superman* seeks to accelerate the expansion of the universe established in *Man of Steel* by depicting the first encounters between Bruce Wayne/Batman (Ben Affleck), Clark/Superman and Diana Prince/Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) in a variation on the team-up narrative. Prior to the film, Bruce/Batman had not been introduced to this universe. *Batman v Superman* performs a process of compression and textual matrix management that is comparable to *Man of Steel's* when establishing Bruce/Batman. Like in MCU *Incredible Hulk*, the traumatic events that instigated Bruce's transformation into Batman are compressed into the opening title sequence, which shows the murder of Bruce's parents, their funeral and Bruce falling into a cave inhabited by bats. This economic retelling of Batman's origin assumes audience familiarity with these events, which were most recently retold in cinema in 2005's *Batman Begins*. Meanwhile, particular images gesture to specific texts from the



*Batman* matrix, such as close-ups on Martha Wayne's (Lauren Cohan) pearl necklace being stretched and broken as she is murdered [Figure 130], which recreate the imagery of panels from *The Dark Knight Returns* [Figure 131]. While the DCEU inverts the MCU's method of construction, laying its universe's main foundations with a team narrative before sprawling out into solo-series, it therefore does this through familiar strategies of compression and textual network management. The universe's breadth and relations to a multiverse of texts in other media are showcased and contained in familiar motifs and images.



*Figure 130 Martha Wayne's pearl necklace is stretched by her attacker in Batman v Superman*



Figure 131 Martha Wayne's pearl necklace is stretched by her attacker in *The Dark Knight Returns*

This thesis has demonstrated that, in superhero blockbusters, spaces and bodies have complex connotative functions, providing sites at which genre conventions, reflections on a textual matrix and strategies to consolidate a diegetic universe intersect and create meaning. In *Batman v Superman*, the *Daily Planet* offices and the Batcave provide Clark's and Bruce's home environments. Unlike the screwball comedy-infused *Daily Planet* offices of *Superman: The Movie*, in *Batman v Superman* the newspaper offices are a space for solemn sociopolitical discourse. The open-plan office [Figure 132] is reflective of Clark's optimism to incite positive change from a public platform, but the pragmatic cynicism of editor Perry White (Laurence Fishburne) tempers Clark's ideals. The Batcave is a compartmentalised underground lair. On display in this space is an armoured costume that has the words "HAHAHA joke's on you BATMAN" scrawled across in yellow spray paint [Figure 133]. The bright colour and handwritten writing exhibit the superhero blockbuster trope of remediating comic book form, while the words and 'HAHAHA' motif connote that they were written by popular Batman villain,

Joker. This image does not just signify Joker's presence in the universe but also gives him a specific history; its sentiment points to 'A Death in the Family', a 1988 comic book story in which Joker kills Jason Todd/Robin, therefore suggesting that this event also happened in the DCEU.<sup>657</sup> Through the way it interlocks with the *Batman* matrix, this grim detail explains why the film's incarnation of Batman has become so aggressive and withdrawn from society. These spaces are representative of the characters' respective cities, Metropolis and Gotham, which the characters come to embody. As Jason Bainbridge explains, 'Metropolis is often referred to [by comic book creators] as New York by day and Gotham as New York by night'.<sup>658</sup> In the DC multiverse, Metropolis typically affirms the modern city's dazzling wonders, Gotham discloses the city's dark underside. While Gotham performs this familiar role in *Batman v Superman*, Metropolis has given way to a disillusionment that weighs on Clark/Superman. *Batman v Superman's* compression of these sentiments into discrete internal spaces and its superheroes compares to the strategy through which superheroes embody different areas of the MCU in *The Avengers*. Placing the two visions of the modern city and their corresponding superheroes in relation to one another also partakes in the superhero genre's ongoing thematisation of the wonders and fears of urban experience.

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<sup>657</sup> Jim Starlin (w), Jim Aparo (p), Mike DeCarlo (i), et al., 'A Death in the Family', *Batman* #426-429 (New York: DC Comics, December 1988-January 1989).

<sup>658</sup> Bainbridge, "'I am New York'", p. 163.



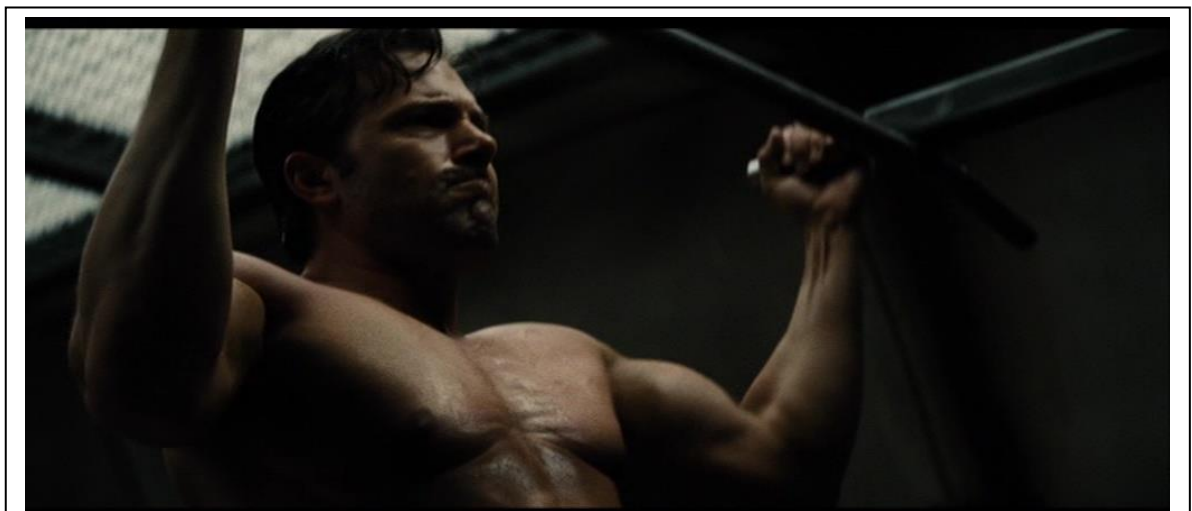
*Figure 132 The Daily Planet offices in Batman v Superman*



*Figure 133 An armoured costume that has been scrawled on is displayed in the Batcave in Batman v Superman*

The qualities of characters' bodies, and the ontology of their representation, performs a key role in situating characters within textual matrices and in relation to other kinds of superheroes and supervillains. Affleck's and Cavill's profilmic musculature is showcased in separate scenes when the characters are shirtless [Figure 134 and Figure 135]. Their physiques are pointedly larger than other performers who have previously played Superman and Batman, implicitly positioning these actors and versions of the characters as superior. For example, in *Batman Begins* Bale's Bruce effortlessly executes rapid press-ups, but Affleck's Bruce trumps this by undertaking pull-ups with a boulder chained to his legs. While Bruce trains to maintain his muscle, Clark's musculature is the result of his alien biology,

which also grants him “godlike” superpowers that are hailed as such within the film. Bruce/Batman’s is the natural human body, Clark/Superman’s the supernatural alien. CGI is used to realise technology that Bruce/Batman has created, such as the Batmobile and Batwing, and Superman’s inherent alien powers, such as laser-vision and flight. It is Batman’s intellect that grants him the upper hand in the battle between the two after he fires a kryptonite shell of his own design at Superman. The bright green cloud that envelops Superman functions conceptually, the iconic colour having always connoted danger to Superman in his textual matrix. The physical blows Batman exchanges with Superman demonstrate that his maintenance of strong masculinity allows him to engage in physical battle with godlike beings, while the conceptual qualities of kryptonite show how Batman’s intellect ultimately enables his victory. As with the battle between Iron Man and Thor in MCU *Avengers*, a human superhero’s personally-developed technologies of war enable man to ascend to godlike status.



*Figure 134 Ben Affleck's musculature is showcased in Batman v Superman*

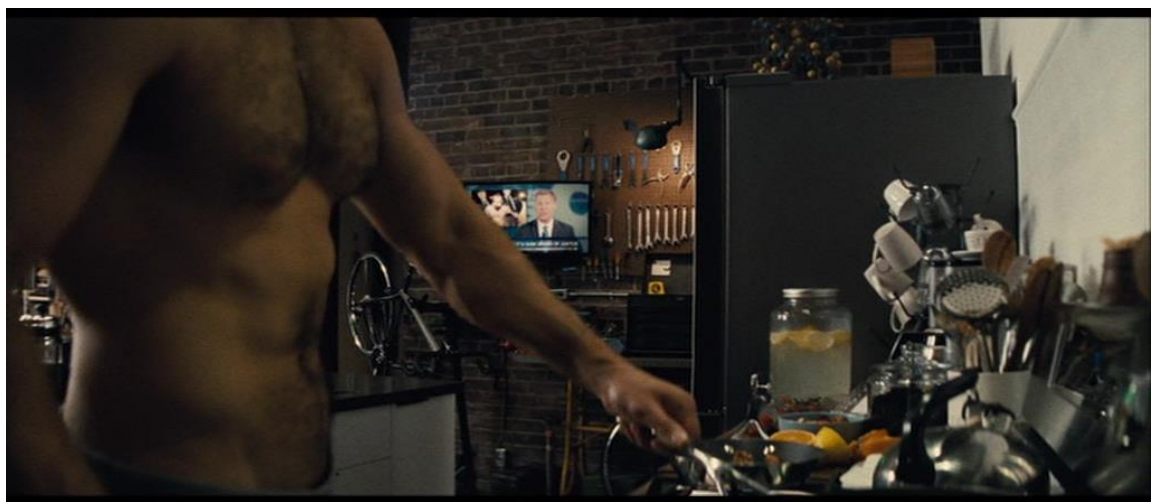
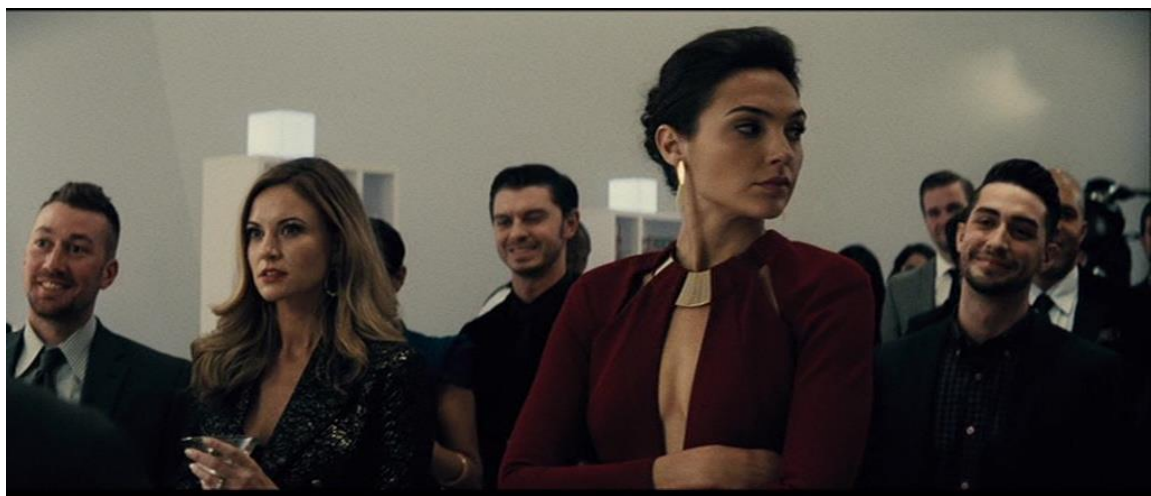


Figure 135 Henry Cavill's musculature is showcased in *Batman v Superman*

Examining the presentation of female characters throughout this thesis has demonstrated that superhero blockbusters exhibit an awareness of, yet struggle to renegotiate, the marginal position of women in the masculine traditions of the superhero genre. An equal and loving relationship between Lois and Superman is central to *Superman: The Movie's* utopian vision, while Raimi's *Spider-Man 3* explores the patriarchal forces that subjugate Mary Jane and perpetuate gender inequality. Elsewhere, MCU *Avengers* attempts to integrate a female character as superhero, but its endeavours to give Natasha/Black Widow a unique role on the team conspire to situate her at a low point on the film's character hierarchy. If MCU *Avengers* seeks to designate a space and role for Black Widow, in *Batman v Superman* Diana/Wonder Woman is not granted her own space but rather gestures outward to the universe's diegetic history and textual future. These gestures occur through select images and elements of style, while often depending on audience knowledge of *Wonder Woman's* textual matrix. A single photo marked "Belgium, November 1918" shows Wonder Woman standing alongside World War I soldiers, thus overlaying Primary World history with a supernatural element, and indicating that this story will be explored in a subsequent film. The image also foregrounds Diana's supernatural qualities as demigoddess and warrior who, typically in *Wonder Woman* texts, originates on the fictional island Themyscira. Diana/Wonder Woman's attire further signifies her supernatural physical strength and history of fighting in wars. The scarlet dress in which Diana is first seen has a thick metallic circle

around the neck [Figure 136], while the sequined texture of the silver dress in which she is next seen recalls chainmail [Figure 137]. Both dresses feature cutaway areas that display parts of her body, including cleavage, back, and her shoulder and collar bones. These designs gesture to the partially-armoured qualities of her superhero costume [Figure 138], which covers her chest, wrists and lower-legs in protective metal, while leaving the rest of her skin bare. Wonder Woman's wardrobe connotes her diegetic and textual history alongside physical powers that situate her alongside the male superheroes, while simultaneously sexualising her slender feminine physique. The female superhero is raised alongside her male counterparts in terms of power, while hegemonic representations of femininity continue to be perpetuated. Meanwhile, by embodying a supernatural area from Wolf's spectrum of worlds to illuminate the DCEU's breath, Diana/Wonder Woman is removed from the film's central discourse on patriarchal power structures in the contemporary city.



*Figure 136 Diana's scarlet dress in Batman v Superman*



Figure 137 Diana's silver dress in *Batman v Superman*



Figure 138 Wonder Woman's costume in *Batman v Superman*

Other scholars have examined the superhero genre's relation to capitalism, for example Hassler-Forest exploring ways in which twenty-first century superhero blockbusters function to maintain neoliberal capitalism.<sup>659</sup> However, as demonstrated in my second and third chapters, aesthetic appreciation of superhero blockbusters reveals the complexities of these films' explorations of sociopolitical values. Twenty-first century superhero blockbusters do not just reflect and perpetuate one kind of capitalism, but undertake involved negotiation of different kinds of capitalism and are wrought with instances of complicitous critique. In *Batman v Superman*, Bruce/Batman's aggression and withdrawal from society

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<sup>659</sup> Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes*.



are implicated in the entrepreneurial capitalism he embodies, while Clark/Superman's compassionate ideals are presented as naïve in the contemporary climate. From this perspective, the distinction between Batman and Superman parallels the clash of Iron Man and Captain America in MCU *Avengers*. Each film pits a morally-precarious pragmatist against an idealist whose values are presented as noble but naïve. The conflation of idealism and the supernatural in Superman, two qualities which in MCU *Avengers* are embodied by Captain America and Thor, respectively, augments *Batman v Superman's* presentation of Superman's values as impractical in the harsh realities of the world in the twenty-first century.

*Batman v Superman's* villain, Lex Luthor (Jesse Eisenberg), is presented as another kind of entrepreneurial capitalist. Lex's jittery demeanor recalls Eisenberg's performance as Mark Zuckerberg in *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010), affirming his status a young and reckless twenty-first century entrepreneurial capitalist. Doomsday, a hypermasculine creature that Lex creates from his own and General Zod's (Michael Shannon) DNA, embodies the instability attributed to Lex's form of capitalism. Lex's scrawny physique is all intellect and no brawn. Doomsday inverts this structure, physically manifesting Lex's self in a monstrous body with no intellect. Doomsday's body defies criteria of perceptual realism, exhibiting superhuman leaps like the eponymous superhero of Lee's *Hulk*. A mid-shot in which bones grow out of Doomsday's skin while he uncontrollably emits jagged red crackle in all directions encapsulates how his physical and conceptual qualities connote the subconscious of a dangerous and unstable psyche [Figure 139]. As with CGI versions of Hulk, both the digital body's assertions of physicality and its conceptual qualities convey character psychology. The extreme physical threat Doomsday poses proves too much for Batman, who is mostly sidelined while Superman and Wonder Woman engage the monster in the climactic battle. This arrangement contrasts MCU *Avengers'* sidelining of Thor so that Iron Man can save the world. Giving the supernatural superheroes a vital role in Doomsday's defeat situates Batman as a fragile representative of humanity. Salvation comes when Superman sacrifices himself, stabbing Doomsday with Batman's kryptonite spear. This act champions Superman's nobility, while putting Batman's weapon in the hands of the valorised idealist

provides a moral justification for the entrepreneurial capitalist's deadly weaponry. Superman's sacrifice subsequently inspires compassion in Bruce/Batman, who renounces his more aggressive tendencies (as indicated when he elects to not brand Lex) and emerges from self-imposed isolation, committing to form a superhero team. While the film's bleak tone defers utopia to a subsequent film, the negotiation of values suggests that utopia can be achieved through a compassionate entrepreneurial capitalist who stands for humanity and opposes emerging unstable forms of entrepreneurial capitalism. Paradoxically, this compassion is maintained through the deployment of deadly force. The film's endeavours to critique the aggressive qualities of Batman's entrepreneurial capitalism are complicit in the justification of his weapons of warfare. *Batman v Superman* organises superhero archetypes differently to MCU *Avengers* to advocate for, while critiquing, entrepreneurial capitalism in a distinct way. The strategies through which superhero blockbusters reconfigure icons of popular culture engender equivocal meanings that shift from text to text.



*Figure 139 Doomsday's bones grow out of his skin and he uncontrollably emits crackle in Batman v Superman*

Pervasive cultural discourses on genre, comic books, blockbusters and superheroes interlock to present superhero blockbusters as aesthetically impoverished. This thesis has challenged such preconceptions by undertaking aesthetic analysis, which reveals the films' stylistic achievements and multiplicities of meaning. When analysing superhero blockbusters, the aesthetics of superhero comic books, which themselves exhibit a great deal of artistry and complexity, must be taken into account.

We must also consider the metamorphosis that superheroes undergo as they move between texts and media, and negotiate emerging trends and technologies. Superhero blockbusters' interactions with networks of texts stimulate the pluralities of meanings that they generate, the films constantly reflecting on, combining and rearranging elements of past texts. The approach developed in this thesis provides the tools to appreciate the complexities of the superhero blockbuster's transformations as superheroes continue to proliferate in, and reshape, Hollywood.

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## Comics and Novels Cited

In this thesis, the first time I have cited an individual story or comic I have provided full bibliographical details of the publication through which I accessed the text. Some were accessed through periodicals, others through edited collections. Following Coogan's citation style in *Superhero*, when I have made reference to specific comic book series or creative runs, I have provided details of the issues and duration for which these ran, rather than listing each issue individually.

I have elected to provide details of up to three creators for each entry. Considering the amount of creators that can work on a superhero comic book series, listing every one would be unwieldy. A creator's role is denoted by the letter that follows their name. The roles that I have included are: (w) = writer, (a) = artist, (p) = penciller, (i) = inker, (l) = layouts and (c) = colourist. For consistency, I have used this same system when citing illustrated novels.

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