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2018

# A to Z of Superhero Movies

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### Recommended Citation

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Claremont McKenna College

**A to Z of Superhero Movies**

Submitted to  
Professor Jesse Lerner

by  
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for  
Senior Thesis  
Spring 2018  
April 23, 2018

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**Abstract**

This project explores the question of originality and appropriation in the creative world by using mashup video as a medium. How can old repetitive stories be deconstructed and transformed into something new? I have created alphabetically ordered montages of shots/scenes containing words/letters from superhero films. By doing so, I do not provide a concrete answer to what is really original in today's world, but rather encourage the audience to actively participate in the viewing experience of the carefully structured ontology and see the infinite possibility of the modern-day mashup culture.

This paper accompanies a video portion of my thesis that has been submitted directly to Professor Jesse Lerner.

## Steven Spielberg and Guillermo del Toro

Steven Spielberg's film, *Ready Player One*, brought in an estimated \$12 million on its opening night March 29th. The film was screened in 4,234 different locations and is also performing well in foreign box offices. (Box Office Mojo) Scoring 77% in Tomatometer and 8.1/10 in IMDb ratings, the movie has received many positive reviews. When we look at the user reviews online, strong nostalgia of the past seems to be what's drawing audience to the theater. (RottenTomatoes) From Stanley Kubrick's 1980 movie, *The Shining*, to Bee Gees' 1977 hit song, *Stayin' Alive*, and 1979 video game, *Adventure*, the movie is packed with homages to the 80s pop culture. Some of the references even go back to 1941, like "rosebud" from Orson Welles' film, *Citizen Kane*. (Spielberg) It is no secret that *Ready Player One* has borrowed existing characters and brands to create something new. Warner Bros. Pictures legal department must have had been busy dealing with the licensing issues. But the small details aside, *Ready Player One* is an adaptation of Ernest Cline's 2011 science fiction novel of the same title. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, following is the definition of *original*:

*2-a) not secondary, derivative, or imitative; 2-b) being the first instance or source from which a copy, reproduction, or translation is or can be made; 3) independent and creative in thought or action.* (Merriam-Webster)

Looking at whichever perspective, the specific characters or the overall plot, this movie is far from being "original." We are taught from elementary school that originality is the key to creativity and that copying other's work is cheating. What are we supposed to feel about the fact that unoriginality is what people are fascinated about the film *Ready Player One* – of course, special effects and CGI techniques are whole different stories on their own.

Let's look at a different film. Guillermo Del Toro's 2017 movie, *The Shape of Water*, was both commercially and critically successful. The film has earned \$63.4 million in the US market and \$123.2 million in the international market as of March 29, 2018. (Box Office Mojo) Of the 277 nominations, the film has won 103 awards, including the Academy Awards for Best Motion Picture of the Year and Golden Globes for Best Director Motion Picture. (IMDb) Yet, there has been a copyright infringement lawsuit filed against this movie of the year. David Zindel, the son of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Paul Zindel, claims that del Toro has plagiarized his father's 1969 play, *Let Me Here Your Whisper*. Zindel argues that there are more than 60 similarities between the two works. Both stories are about "a lonely janitorial cleaning woman who works the graveyard shift at a scientific laboratory facility that performs animal experiments for military use. She becomes fascinated by a fantastic intelligent aquatic creature, held captive in a glass tank." Fox Searchlight and the director, however, is refuting the claim. (France)

## Originality and Repetition

Guillermo Del Toro and Fox Searchlight are not the only filmmaker and distributor in a fight regarding copyright infringement claims. For example, on April 2nd, 2018, Charlie Kessler has filed a lawsuit against Matt and Ross Duffers, the creators of Netflix Original *Stranger Things*. Kessler argues that the concept idea for this hit Sci-Fi Series was stolen from his 2012 short film *Montauk*. (Arkin) In fact, according to the case-by-case court records analysis provided by Transactional Records Access Clearing House (TRAC) at Syracuse University, there has been total 3,183 copyright infringement cases filed during the first 11 months of FY 2017. The number has been constantly increasing since 2010, peaked at 2015 with 5,042 lawsuits, and is decreasing again. The most number of cases was filed from the Central District of California, Los Angeles, totaling 674 cases. The South District of New York, Manhattan, was the second in rank, with 570 lawsuits being filed. Together, these two districts account for 39.1% of all cases. (TRAC Reports) Of course, some of these cases might have spurred because some people are trying to leech money out of successful film or TV show. Or people did really steal someone else's intellectual property. However, it is usually the issue of defining originality in the creative world in most of the cases. Can idea, story, cinematography, production design, or editing ever be original?

In 2004, Christopher Booker published a book, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, which categorizes stories into seven basic themes: Overcoming the monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. Some stories might cross over several categories, but they are still within the seven plots. (Booker) According to this theory, it seems inevitable for the filmmakers to be infringing upon each other's copyrights.

Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* has the characteristics of The Quest, Tragedy, and maybe Rebirth. *The protagonist, Eliza, and some companions, Zelda and Giles, set out to acquire an important object, the sea creature, or to get to a location, the river, facing many obstacles, General Hoyt and the military, and temptations, falling in love with the sea creature, along the way.* And this is the definition of The Quest plot. (Wikipedia) It also has the elements of Tragedy. The unfortunate ending of the fundamentally good character evokes pity from the audience. But the death of Eliza can be also interpreted as the moment of rebirth of the character. The very last scene suggests that Eliza and the sea creature has returned to the river and are happy together. The gunshot killed Eliza, but she was brought back to life by the healing power of the sea creature. She no longer needs to live in the real world, a world full of hatred, injustice, and tragedy. (Del Toro)

What other stories has the elements of The Quest? The classic Greek poem Homer's *Odyssey*, Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and *Indiana Jones* franchise by Steven Spielberg. What about tragedy? We all learned about the Shakespearean tragedy in high school literature class: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, and more. Should Homer and Shakespeare sue del Toro for stealing their conceptual idea? They technically can't. When they wrote their stories, there were no such thing as copyrights. And even if there existed a copyright law, their works have entered the public domain. The exclusive intellectual property rights have expired for Homer and Shakespeare. According to the United States Copyright Office, the Copyright Act of 1976 protects one's intellectual property for life plus 70 years. (United States Copyright Office) This means that copyright is just a legal term, not the measure of originality. Then what really is original?



## Everything is a Mashup

Kirby Ferguson says in his documentary, *Everything is a Remix*, that “the act of creation is surrounded by a fog of myths. Myths that creativity comes via inspiration. That original creations break the mold. That they are the products of geniuses. And appear as quickly as electricity can heat a filament. But creativity isn’t magic. It happens by applying ordinary tools of thought to existing materials.”

(Ferguson, *Everything is a Remix: Part 3*) Brett Gaylor comes up with a manifesto in 2008 regarding this cultural phenomenon:

1. *Culture always builds on the past*
2. *The past always tries to control the future*
3. *Our future is becoming less free*
4. *To build free society, you must limit the control of the past*

He advances his argument by introducing the Copyleft movement, which encourages the free exchange of creativity. He also talks about how corporations like The Walt Disney Company prevents the advancement of culture by restricting contents from being in the public domain. According to Gaylor it is more than natural for people to have access existing materials and remix them to make something new. (Gaylor)

These points are reemphasized in Robert Shore’s 2017 book, *Beg, Steal & Borrow: Artists Against Originality*. The book talks about how appropriation and copying are the basis for art creation. The title of the book itself is an appropriation of a song *Beg, Steal or Borrow* by Ray LaMontagne And The Pariah Dogs. And there has been other songs with similar title, *Beg Borrow and Steal* in the 1960s by Vernon Harrell and Ohio Express. Shore starts the first chapter by talking about the American artist Elaine Sturtevant who is famous for the replication of other artists’ work. Then he talks about Marcel Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.*, a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s

*Mona Lisa*. And many other artists introduced in this book explores how simple transformation, addition or subtraction of an existing piece of art can totally change the meaning of the work. And with the birth of Internet and so many content being available to the public online has been encouraging such trend. Everyone can contribute in the cultural conversation happening on the World Wide Web. Shore writes that “art has become one big stylistic mash-up, then, an orgy of copying and collaging beyond the logic of time and space.” (Shore 159)

We can define mashup as a form of art involving the creation process of taking old and making new. I have been experimenting with this concept with my Fall 2017 Senior Seminar Project, *Agents of Whitewashed Movies*. I made a 5-minute mashup video using 30 different films to make a commentary on the whitewashing practice – casting white actors in roles for people of color – of Hollywood. I was fascinated by how existing materials can completely change its meanings when juxtaposed in a different manner. I had a concrete narrative ready for my video: Whitewashed movie characters come save Korea from an actual historical tragedy happened in 1980, the Gwangju Democratic Uprising. Thus, I was carefully selecting scenes with a specific visual aesthetic in mind. And the narrative itself followed a typical Hero’s Journey. This limited my chances to experiment freely with the medium of “mashup” itself. I became curious in exploring the consequences of a mashup when the chances were left to an arbitrary decision. For my Spring 2018 thesis, I wanted to continue exploring the infinite possibilities of a mashup video. I wanted to see if stories that have been “told, retold, transformed, referenced, and subverted since the dawn of cinema” (Ferguson, *Everything is a Remix: Part 2*) can become something really “new”.

## Hollywood Since 2008

The boom of superhero franchise in Hollywood proves this trend of everything being a mashup. The plot of superhero movies is very simple. There is a protagonist usually flawed in a certain degree, and there is an antagonist who usually wants to take over the world with its evil plan. This antagonistic force seems to be too powerful to be defeated at first, but with the help of allies and friends, the protagonist wins the battle against the antagonist. If the film is a prequel to the main event, the superhero may lose the battle, but he/she will always win in the next movie. This simple story has been told over and over to the audience, yet is still the most revenue making genre in today's Hollywood.

Marvel begin its ambitious project of bringing back its glorious comic book characters on screen in 2008. The first Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise film *Iron Man* by Jon Favreau was released in 2008. It was a huge success. The total gross was \$318 million, which ranked this film second on the domestic box office hit that year. The first in rank with \$533 million domestic gross was *The Dark Knight*, another superhero film by DC Comics. (Box Office Mojo) These two companies have produced total 40 live action superhero films since 2008. This means that a superhero film is being released in a quarterly basis on average. In fact, in 2018, *Black Panther* has come out in February, *Avengers: Infinity War* will be released in April, *Deadpool 2* in May, *Ant-Man and the Wasp* in July, *Venom* in October, and *Aquaman* in December. (IMDb)

Thus, Superhero movies produced after 2008 seemed like the best choice for me to work on mashing up. What will happen when these movies are randomly deconstructed and montaged back together? Can they become something more than another typical superhero video where the good fights the bad for world peace?

## **A to Z of Superhero Movies**

Hollis Frampton's 1970 film *Zorns Lemma* was a great source of inspiration for my video. Frampton experiments with the structural and ontological system of still photos in a cinematic setting. He also explores the relationship between words and images by slowly replacing words with repeated arbitrary images. (Frampton)

Structural film is term coined by P. Adam Sitney in the late 1960s defined as a simplified and predetermined cinema. I believe this concept of abstaining from complex production techniques goes along with what mashup artists are aiming to achieve: democratization of art, non-bourgeois advancement of culture. You don't need an MFA degree or be an employee of a huge corporate studio to appreciate these works. These films are driven by formalist explorations by carefully calculated manipulations of content. Often it is the audience's active viewing than the narrative itself that constitutes the driving force behind the work itself. (Madison Museum of Contemporary Art) According to Federico Windhasen, however, Frampton has actually challenged Sitney's notion of Structural Film. Frampton designates imperfect and "dangerous" elements for his field in order to ensure some measure of heterogeneity. The game he plays is most valuable when it is expansive, generating diversity in the field of photographic practice and undermining the viewer's sense of how and why a picture can appear to be "right" or "wrong." (Windhausen)

The execution of my project was simple and straightforward: find footages that I want to borrow and create a montage using Adobe Premiere. I first decided to break down the movies into shots/scenes containing letter/words on screen. I spent the first few weeks watching 41 movies from beginning to end to find footages with book titles, restaurant signs, or building names. All the movies that are used in my video are Marvel Studios and DC Comics superhero franchise films produced after the year

2008. There is one exception, *Batman Begins*, a 2005 film, but since this movie is a part of trilogy, I found it relevant to include in my project. Using Excel Spreadsheet, I kept log of when and where each alphabet appears on screen. It was a tedious and time consuming work, but was an essential process for me to familiarize myself with the footages. I either used a screen recording software or copied DVDs to capture the moments that I want to use. However, I ended up only using 39 movies in my video, because there simply wasn't the necessary shot I was looking for in *Justice League* and *Punisher: War Zone*.

Then I reorganized these footages in alphabetical order. I chose the alphabetical order because it was the most random order that I could think of. In statistics, random means “of or characterizing a process of selection in which each item of a set has an equal probability of being chosen.” (Dictionary.com) The MCU parody opening sequence is also ordered alphabetically. All the characters show up in the order of their name: Hulk – Iron Man – Joker – Killmonger – Loki – Mistyque – Nebula – Odin – Punisher – Quicksilver and so on. The actual video is consisted of 26 seconds each of the alphabets. Sometimes what we see on screen may not entirely be English alphabet. There are shots with Russian Cyrillic Script, Japanese Kanji, and Chinese Hanzhi. And their placement follows what they sound like in English alphabet. For example, we see a shot from *Captain America Civil War* where Tony Stark looks at a video labeled “16 Декабрь 1991”. Here “Декабрь” is pronounced as “Dekabrya,” thus was placed with the other Ds. Same goes for the scene from *The Wolverine* with the Japanese word “料金表” which is pronounced as “Ryōkin-hyō” and the scene from *Doctor Strange* with the Chinese word “星” which is pronounced as “xing.” There are some scenes with multiple letters appearing on screen. I hope these will lead to

more active participation of the audience in choosing which alphabet to follow. And even question whether it is the “right” choice.

In creating this mashup, I tried to refrain from using footages that screams “I am from a superhero film” like a typical fighting and explosion scenes. I followed the very basic editing techniques to carry on the narrative. There was no specific plot that I had in mind in making this video. Rather, I tried to focus on individual shots and how two can be adjacently placed. How would the B-footage logically come after the A-footage was a very important question. I tried to match the actions or the dialogues so that the video will have a continuous feeling to it. If someone asks a question, I tried to answer it with the following shot. If none of these worked, I at least tried to use J and L cuts or even let the audio completely overlap with the next few shots.

I hope such structuralized and formalized scenes will allow the viewers to be engaged in the viewing experience. The audience could simply be entertained because they are coming across their favorite scenes from their favorite movie. Or they can decide to indulge in an aesthetically pleasing experience thinking about the construction of this video. Whichever they choose is completely up to the viewers.

I am satisfied with my end result, especially that I didn’t know how this video will turn out when I started the project. All I knew was that I wanted to experiment with the superhero movies to see whether it is possible to come up with an original story. I am very happy that *A to Z of Superhero Movies* didn’t turn out to be another superhero narrative. However, there is one thing that I would like to have it differently. I think this could have worked better as a gallery installation instead of being screened at the auditorium. I even matched the very last scene with the very first, so that the video would work continuously when looped over and over. I believe the continuous loop would add to my commentary on the repetition of arts/films and it

would also create an even interesting experience for the viewers. When watched the second time, they might be able to see something that they haven't noticed or thought about before. And these new perceptions will create another layer on top of the video that I have created, which will make it even more original and different for every individual viewer.

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