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# **Spending Power over Superpower**

## **An Investigation of Increasing Diversity in the Superhero Genre**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

Superhero narratives mediate what the socio-political climate presents within our cultural history. This thesis aims to analyse the change of diversity in superhero narratives, predominantly the period of transition from comic-books to film and television properties. The major argument presented by this thesis is that the comic-book and film and television industries are compelled to be more diverse, not by developing a sense of morality, but rather through financial incentives provided by the companies growing and increasingly diverse audience. This thesis adopts a thematic approach and is divided into three sub-sections (industry, representation and diversity), each of which discusses an important aspect of the comic-book industries. The characters and themes discussed within representation and diversity are discussed within the context of the industry. Superheroes and characters such as Batman, Wonder Woman and Black Panther are prominently analysed due to their longevity and their relation to the industries' motives. Through the use of primary and secondary source material, this thesis engages with an examination of comic-book, film and television narratives, in addition to the support and occasionally questioned discussion of scholarly viewpoints.

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## INTRODUCTION

The definition of a superhero is ambiguous and has been debated amongst scholars, creative teams and fans for decades.<sup>1</sup> Superheroes typically embody an assortment of superhuman powers and/or have a remarkable skillset. Superheroes and their narratives allow us to explore possible futures; 'exploring what the superhero is aids our understanding of our recent past, contemporary political and social situation, and future' (Rosenberg & Coogan, 2013: p.xix). Superhero narratives provide readers with a reflection of socio-political issues that have been present throughout our cultural history and continue to pursue this with current affairs. Since the superhero genre's inception, with the debut of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 (1938), superhero narratives have engaged with socio-political issues whilst also providing entertainment for the masses, both within its original format as comic-books and as an adaptation in other media, such as film and television. Scott McCloud states that the art-form of comic-books is centuries old and performs as a method of story-telling (McCloud, 1993: p.151-152). Over the last ten years, the superhero genre's presence in film and television has become highly profitable for the comic-book industry.<sup>2</sup> While the superhero genre is identified as a genre within comic-book literature, it should also be noted that the term exists in filmic terms. Steve Neale states that genre works to emphasise and provide spectators with the importance of variety and difference, as well as the importance of repetition (Neale, 2000: p.231). The superhero genre has changed and evolved over time because, like all

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<sup>1</sup> See: Grant Morrison's *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* and Jeffrey K. Johnson's *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society* for discussions regarding the definition of a superhero. Robin S. Rosenberg & Peter Coogan's *What is a Superhero?* Explores a variety of perspectives from scholars to the creative teams behind the comic-books themselves. For fan discussion see: Paul D. Waite's question: *Why are heroes without supernatural powers considered "super" heroes?*, Science Fiction & Fantasy, accessed 20 October, 2016, <<https://scifi.stackexchange.com/questions/116975/why-are-heroes-without-supernatural-powers-considered-super-heroes/122448#122448>>.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, the word 'industry' refers to the comic-book industry as a whole (unless specified otherwise), 'industries' refers to multiple industries (for example, the film, television and comic-book industry) and 'companies' are exclusively known as Marvel and DC.

genres, it responds to changes in the culture, but the core conventions of mission, powers, and identity have remained stable (Rosenberg & Coogan, 2013: p.10). This thesis will explore a variety of superhero narratives in comic-books, films and television series, considering why there has been a resurgence of superhero narratives within the last ten years. This thesis will also consider the opportunities it has provided to the diversity of non-white male superheroes and their narratives.

Within this discussion, case studies will help support the arguments made in each sub-section. The industrial decisions considered in each sub-section represent a central argument to the two questions this study aims to answer. The first sub-section analyses the comic-book industries' past and how it has affected its contemporary cinematic properties, whilst also considering the politics of business mergers and adaptation theory. The case studies regarding the Spider-Man and the Batman franchises present a better understanding into how both the comic-book and film industry operates, particularly focusing on studio interference, the benefits of rebooting/remaking popular superhero narratives and the industries' eagerness to alter superheroes for guaranteed revenue. Both discussions analyse the industrial progression of catering to different audiences over time and how both the comic-book and film industry capitalises on this method as well as their engagements with the socio-political context. The purpose of this sub-section is to illustrate the industries' primary objective: to increase profits.

The second sub-section examines the treatment of superheroines and female characters in the superhero genre. This sub-section analyses the treatment and depiction of superheroines, and to a lesser extent, male superheroes by predominantly focusing on their representation in comic-books and their adapted narratives over time. The representation and treatment of superheroines/female characters is divided into three subject-matters. The depiction of superheroines/female characters has often been over-sexualised, whereas the treatment of

superheroines/female characters focuses on rape and abuse against women/superheroines and de-powerment of superheroines/female characters. Wonder Woman is a notable example throughout this entire sub-section given her lengthy publication history. The sexualisation and treatment of male superheroes is also discussed, primarily in relation to the superhero character Nightwing, although this will be far briefer than the discussions regarding superheroines/female characters. The regularity of superheroine adaptations in film and television properties and the change in audience demographic is considered within this sub-section.

The third and final sub-section considers the representation of diverse superheroes in superhero narratives and the improvements of such representations over time. This refers to black superheroes and disabled superheroes and their narratives. This sub-section typically explores the stereotypical depictions of diverse superhero characters and their narratives, in addition to the industries' efforts to improve their representations, and the adaptation of diverse superheroes in a variety of media.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the consideration of diversity within the industry, particularly creative teams/members helming a diverse character/narrative is also discussed. Therefore, the purpose of the second and third sub-section is to examine the depiction and treatment of superheroines/female characters and diverse superheroes and illustrate the industries' strengths and limitations when recognising the opportunities it has provided these superhero characters.

The structure of this thesis establishes an understanding of the industries' history, how it operates and the decisions behind their adapted properties. The case studies incorporated throughout this thesis function as an analysis of this and outline the industries' central motive: to

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<sup>3</sup> Improvement/Improving refers to a clear progression towards increasingly diverse politics of representation.



financially prosper. The second and third sub-section perform as an extension of this, but also present an in-depth and specific purpose regarding the diversity of superheroes and their adapted texts. The methodological approach to this thesis uses textual analysis throughout each sub-section, as it predominantly analyses primary and secondary texts/sources, with the thesis' structure being primarily thematic.

The comic-book industry has successfully translated their comic-book narratives in other media, specifically in live-action film, animation and television properties. The adapted texts which have dominated the blockbuster era of films have increased a wider fascination in the superhero genre and ultimately this has fed back into the popularity of comic-books. According to John Jackson Miller, who manages ComiChron.com, June 2016 saw the industry's top-selling month since 1997 (Miller, 2016). One factor being the increase of comic-book sales coinciding with the rise and regular release of superhero films. The other factor being the online accessibility and ability to purchase comic-books online, which has seen a significant increase in the sales of comic-books (Andrews, 2016; Gustines, 2014). Considering the transition from B-movie (low-budget) films, to one of the leading film genres in Hollywood, the superhero genre and its narratives have made a considerable amount of money. As will be discussed, the comic-book industry generally appeals to a male-dominated readership, yet, the adaptations regularly interest a wider, more diverse audience. Prior to Disney's acquisition of Marvel in 2009, both companies were lacking in a particular domain: Marvel's production budgets benefitted from Disney's funding, and Disney sought out new markets, one of which was the young male audience. Disney resurrected Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's 1960s The Avengers and lesser-known characters such as Ant-Man and made Marvel a mainstream property like never before, although Marvel's motive for a cinematic universe was underway with the release of *Iron Man* (Favreau, 2008) before Disney's involvement (Wills,

2017: p.82). Marvel/Disney became a significant competitor for DC/Warner Brother's live-action properties, and sparked interest in a larger market.

Despite this, and as will be discussed in more detail later, the industry has received some backlash regarding diversity within the industry, as well as the materials they produce and distribute. The stereotypical depictions and treatment of superheroines/female characters and diverse superheroes has presented a problematic approach since the genre and industries' inception. From a historical perspective, these representations typically coincided with the socio-political context of the time, and the industries' persistence to resolve these depictions are slowly improving. The recycling of white male superheroes into black and female interpretations has produced many problems for the industries' hard-core comic-book readership/audience and newcomers interested in the diverse selection of superhero narratives. Furthermore, superheroines and diverse superheroes are typically depicted as secondary characters to the leading white male protagonists in many adapted superhero narratives. It is apparent that this domain is developing, particularly because this media engages with a larger audience. The comic-book industry has successfully capitalised on the rebirth of the superhero narrative in a variety of media; however, the way in which the industry functions and the opportunities it has offered diverse superheroes thus far, is a work in progress.

This thesis examines many critical perspectives, ranging from adaptation theory to feminism. Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013) provides a relevant interpretation of the process of adaptation across various media platforms, moving beyond literature to film adaptations, and including new media landscapes such as video games and theme parks. While Robert Stam's *Literature through Film* (2005) is significant by providing a multicultural history of literature and its filmic re-envisioning's, Hutcheon demonstrates that adaptation theory is not

completely concerned with fidelity and extends the discussion beyond novel to film. This is critical when examining the transition of superhero narratives from comic-books to film and television properties, in addition to audience responses and the profit motive. Henry Jenkins book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2008) discusses how the circulation of media content (across different media platforms and competing media economies) relies on consumers' active participation. By using case studies on specific films and television series, Jenkins explores how fans are transforming narratives for their personal desires, and how these 'grassroots activists' are clashing with commercial media producers over intellectual property. Eugenia Siapera's (2017) book expands on previous media theories, including Jenkins' work, and discusses many subject-matters in regards to how culture has changed and adapted around new media. The case studies concerning social media and gaming in particular, are useful when examining the shift from a group or community to one that revolves around networks established by individuals with shared backgrounds and interests. Additionally, the discussion of human creativity for online gaming communities, as well as the media producers that attempt to control and limit these communities are also considered. In this regard, both Jenkins and Siapera's studies corresponds with the discussions concerning embedded comic-book fans and the industries' desire to interest new readers/audiences in superhero narratives over multiple platforms (such as comic-books and films), without disrupting embedded comic-book fans continuous investments.

In regards to specific case studies when discussing adaptation theory, Roberta Pearson, William Uricchio and Will Brooker's book *Many More Lives of the Batman* (2015) expands on Pearson and Uricchio's previous book, *The Many Lives of Batman* (1991), and presents an in-depth discussion of Batman as a cultural icon across many media platforms. The importance of this exploration enables different versions of a superhero to co-exist in comic-books, film, and television narratives, therefore capitalising on multiple audiences. When considering feminist film theory,

Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1999) is necessary when understanding how women are portrayed in film. While Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' theory applies to the ways in which superheroines are drawn and depicted in comic-book, film and television narratives, Mulvey's theory does not explicitly focus on the depiction of superheroines. Michael Lavin specifically refers to the portrayal and sexualisation of superheroines within *Women in Comic Books* (1998), however, both Mulvey's and Lavin's source material is more concerned with specific moments in time, providing a historical perspective about the Hollywood Studio Era and the depiction of superheroines. Sue Thornham's *Feminist Film Theory* (1999) examines multiple discussions regarding feminist film theory, ranging from its inception (1970s) to postmodernism in the 1990s. In addition to the role of the woman as an object of desire, female spectatorship and the cinematic pleasures of black women and lesbian women are also discussed. Mulvey's thesis does not consider the sexualisation of men in film, and as an extension, certain male superheroes. Steve Neale's *Masculinity as Spectacle* (1983) uses Mulvey's thesis as a platform to discuss the sexualisation and objectification of male bodies in film. This is useful when discussing the sexualisation of male superheroes and whether male characters (superheroes) can be sexualised in the same way that female characters (superheroines) are in film and other media.

Keeping with the portrayal of superheroines in comic-book, film and television narratives, Rikke Schubart's (2007) work explores the depiction and treatment of women in male-dominated genres, specifically action films. Schubart identifies five stereotypes typically embodied by women in action films, these include: the dominatrix, the Amazon, the daughter, the mother and the rape-avenger. Predominantly focusing on the rape-avenger, Schubart's investigation links neatly with Tammy Garland, Mackenzie Grimes and Kathryn Branch's (2016) work on rape within comic-book narratives, explicitly documenting the brutalisation of superheroines and male superheroes, and stating that rape is often used as a plot device within their narratives. Yvonne Tasker's (1993) work

on the action genre, in regards to the changing depiction of women in film (specifically the recent stereotype of the muscular heroine and the portrayal of men in action films), in conjunction with the aforementioned sources, contribute to understanding the treatment of superheroines and strong female characters, as well as the portrayal of men and the issues of male rape in comic-books. The treatment of Barbara Gordon in *The Killing Joke* (1988) is similar to the use of rape as a plot device in comic-book narratives, and the controversy regarding the character's treatment has resurfaced after it was suggested as the basis for the upcoming Batgirl film (Mihachik, 2018).

The literature surrounding the portrayal of women in film, television and comic-book narratives, notably Carolyn Cocca's (2014) and Michael Goodrum's (2014) works, is extensive when comparing the literature on diverse superheroes, in this case, black superheroes and disabled superheroes. Adilifu Nama's work on the depiction of black characters, or lack thereof and the concept of 'otherness' in science-fiction film (2008) was followed by two publications that focus on the portrayal of black superheroes in comic-book literature (2009); (2011). Nama provides an insightful discussion of the social relevancy of black superheroes and the changes of their depiction throughout history, however, there is a lack of analysis regarding live-action adaptations and contemporary publications. Only a small amount of authors have extensively written about race and the representation of black superheroes and characters, including Sheena C. Howard & Ronald L. Jackson II (2014) and Jeffrey A. Brown (1999); (2000). Some authors, such as Bradford W. Wright (2001), Rob Lendrum (2005), Michael van Dyk (2006) and Michael Goodrum (2016) offer some significant insights to the topic of race and representation of black superheroes and characters, in addition to the history and culture surrounding their emergence. Considering *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) is the first film within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to feature predominately black talent behind and in front of the camera (in addition to the *Luke Cage* [2016-] television series), the literature regarding the portrayal of black superheroes, specifically their

representation in film and television, is limited. Colin Barnes and Geoffrey Mercer's *Exploring Disability* (2011) examines changing legislation, social policy and the changing definition of 'disability'. Other than Jose Alaniz's *Death, Disability, and the Superhero* (2014), there is a lack of research dedicated to the portrayal of disability in media, specifically disabled superheroes. While Barnes and Mercer's chapter is applicable to the superhero narratives that focus on disabled superheroes and characters (specifically the super-crip stereotype where a character's traumatic experience grants them superhero abilities), the chapter dedicates itself to analysing the representation of disability in factual/documentary television programmes.

The scholarly work chosen and its relevancy towards this research has proven to be beneficial, particularly the historical exploration of the comic-book industry and their superhero narratives, in addition to the industries' target audience. In a wider context, many of these sources are particularly helpful when applying them to the diversity and representation of superheroes and superheroines. However, research regarding the comic-book industry's demographic is concerned with specific periods of time, and more consideration should focus on current/changing demographics, modern superhero narratives in print format and their transition from print to cinema. These sources, and their strengths and limitations, will be discussed in greater detail where appropriate throughout the main body of text.

## INDUSTRY

Superhero adaptations have proved one of the most successful genres in the contemporary American film industry. When assessing Marvel and DC, it is important to consider their industrial nature to fully understand what texts they ultimately adapt to the silver screen.<sup>1</sup> Like the studio system of the 'Big Five' Hollywood studios in the production and distribution of films (which operated between 1930 and 1948), Marvel and DC represent the two largest comic-book companies that dominate the comic-book market (Pearson, 1991: p.81). Marvel and DC have successfully integrated their businesses with already-established companies within the film industry. The merger of DC with Warner Bros. in 1989 and Marvel with The Walt Disney Company (Disney) provided DC and Marvel with the platform needed to extend their texts and narratives into different media.<sup>2</sup> To understand how Marvel and DC became the two biggest multi-media companies within the comic-book industry, and now within the film and television industry, one must understand the history, successes and failures of both. The transition from the distribution of artistic creations within a panelled magazine to the live-action television/film properties for which they are currently more well-known, proves useful for understanding the corporate management of superhero narratives and the outcome of the popularity of such characters and narratives within the film and television industry. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), McCloud states that he does not know when comics originated, but the availability of comics to be enjoyed by everyone came after the mass-production of texts via the introduction of the printing press in Europe (McCloud, 1993: p.15-16). Superman's first adventure led to the establishment of the superhero genre and helped propel the comic-book industry to new heights of market success

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<sup>1</sup> Comic-book companies Dark Horse Comics and Image Comics successfully adapted their superheroes Hellboy and Spawn into live-action properties with *Hellboy* (del Toro, 2004) and its sequel *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (del Toro, 2008) and *Spawn* (Dippe, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Marvel had already created Marvel Studios in 1996 prior to Disney's acquisition, and distributed the majority of their 'Phase One' films through Paramount Pictures and Universal Pictures.

(Regalado, 2007: p.120). To provide an overview of the companies, with regards to their recent and upcoming projects and an understanding of their backgrounds, this sub-section will be broken up into different categories. The historical background of Marvel and DC will be evaluated, primarily focusing on the evolution of comics into live-action film and television adaptations. Adaptation theory will be considered when analysing the two companies' film narratives, particularly when examining the industries' corporate decisions and an employee's interpretation of a superhero and/or its narrative. Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* will feature here as she provides a recent interpretation of adaptation, further implying that adaptation moves beyond the contrast between 'credible' literature texts and films. The application of Hutcheon's adaptation theory is important when associating her thesis with the evolution of superhero narratives from comic-books to film and television mediums. Finally, individual case studies will be used in highlighting the modern film industry and the expansion of the superhero narrative over a wide-range of mediums. In addition, the discussion of marketing and advertising regarding these case studies will also be addressed. The industrial theme of superhero narratives will also feature throughout the second and final sub-sections when discussing women and ethnically diverse superheroes, specifically when assessing the diversity of the creators, artists and filmmakers behind the characters/narratives the studios ultimately choose to adapt.

### **Clash of the Titans: The History of DC and Marvel**

The artistic vault linked to Marvel and DC Comics has provided readers and audiences with decades of superhero-related action that has been translated onto the big screen. The big-budget modern superhero film started with *Superman* (Donner, 1978) by Warner Bros.. Despite television films, television series, such as the popular *Batman* television show (1966-1968), serials and radio shows preceding *Superman*, Richard Donner's adaptation of the Man of Steel provided a transition into modern 'blockbuster' filmmaking and marked the advancement of superhero narratives in the



current blockbuster era. Comic book characters such as Superman and Batman appeared in B movies and film serials long before the blockbuster adaptations of the 1970s and 1980s (Gordon, 2007: p.vii). In terms of producing film adaptations of comic-book superheroes, vampire-superhero *Blade* (Norrington, 1998) was introduced and Marvel eventually caught up. It is speculated that the critical response from fans and critics, and the paltry returns that Marvel received from *Blade* (and later, *X-Men* [Singer, 2000]) prompted Marvel to produce in-house films themselves (Whitbrook, 2015). However, unlike DC, a subsidiary of Warner Bros., Marvel has had a chain of corporate mergers and takeovers. Therefore, this presented one of many obstacles the publishing company faced in order to progress into different mediums. DC has had an advantage when it comes to adapting texts over multiple mediums, particularly when Warner Bros. merged with Time Inc. in 1989 (creating the largest entertainment and media conglomerate in the world), thereby producing Tim Burton's Batman titles (*Batman* [Burton, 1989] and *Batman Returns* [Burton, 1992]) and Bryan Singer's Superman title (*Superman Returns* [Singer, 2006]); after Warner Bros. acquired the rights to Superman in 1993 (Norris, 1989).<sup>3</sup>

Before the establishment of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) with the release of *Iron Man*, Marvel was faced with the release of film adaptations from outside their cinematic universe. These included *X-Men*, *Spider-Man* (Raimi, 2002), *Fantastic Four* (Story, 2005), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Webb, 2012) and their following sequels. Marvel sold the rights to their characters to film studios around the time of their bankruptcy in 1996. Marvel's strategy in the 1990s was one of duplication, of trying to restructure the corporation along the lines of a conglomerate like Disney, or of rival comic book publisher DC Comics (Johnson, 2007: p.70). Unlike Disney or DC/Warner Bros. Marvel did not have an internal film outlet to translate their intellectual/artistic property into

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<sup>3</sup> This was immediately after the success of 'The Death of Superman', which featured in multiple Superman comic-book titles, including *Superman* (Vol 2) #75.

other mediums, in order to duplicate the same success (Johnson, 2007: p.68). Instead, Marvel focused on increasing revenues from licensing, by selling rights to their intellectual and artistic property to Hollywood studios. However, Marvel sold and received only a small percentage of revenues for their characters and from the first movies (Abad-Santos, 2015). Due to the success of *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* at the box office, Marvel soon realised that the translation of superhero characters and narratives to the big screen was a promising investment. After the success of *Spider-Man*, all the major studios had conference tables full of comic books (Rossen, 2008: p.270). Marvel established the Marvel Cinematic Universe and started to produce and distribute their own films through Marvel Studios (previously a subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment). Alternatively, the 'problem' of licensing Marvel's characters to other studios could suggest that it was a challenge for Marvel that eventually led to the establishment of Marvel Studios.

Marvel did not financially risk the production of Marvel-owned superheroes themselves, however, this challenge created a platform from which Marvel Studios began to operate. The release of *Iron Man* marked the beginning of the shared universe and media franchise.<sup>4</sup> *Iron Man* was the first self-financing film through Marvel Studios and was distributed by Paramount Pictures, as were the majority of Marvel's 'Phase One' films (including *Iron Man 2* [Favreau, 2010], *Thor* [Branagh, 2011] and *Captain America: The First Avenger* [Johnston, 2011]). Disney's acquisition of Marvel Entertainment and Marvel Studios concludes what the world knows as Marvel today. At Disney, the strategic logic for acquiring Marvel seems to have emerged as its executives were considering how they could best leverage their company's core entertainment-based competency and brand in a fairly dramatic way (Calandro, 2010: p.42-43). Disney negotiated with Marvel and

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<sup>4</sup> A shared universe pertains to a set of creative works where multiple artists (filmmakers etc) contribute their individual work(s) that can exist independently, but also belongs in the collaborative development of the storyline, characters, or overall project.

Paramount Pictures and purchased the distribution rights to the films Paramount Pictures originally held and distributed prior to Disney and Marvel's merger in 2013. Not only was this move beneficial for Marvel, who were able to produce and distribute superhero narratives through a multitude of mediums under their own artistic control, and therefore, able to compete with their major rival DC; it also served Disney a target market to which they were not necessarily appealing before. Disney had found it extremely hard to attract the pre-teen boys market, and therefore this purchase became a favourable transition for both Marvel and Disney (Clark, 2009).

### **The Theory of Adaptation and the Comic-book Industry**

Comic-books have not always been considered 'literature'. Many members of the academic community saw, and see, comics as ephemeral and often acted with hostility towards the medium (Ellis, 2000: p.21). Most famous was the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), which stated that comic-books were a damaging form of popular literature and encouraged children to behave destructively. Even in the present-day, superhero comic-books are considered by some to be 'pure junk' or not serious reading material (Chute, 2008: p.452; Johnson, 2012: p.1). While Hillary Chute and Jeffery K. Johnson disprove this, Chute still displays some resistance to fictional comic-books and solely focuses 'on the strongest genre in the field: non-fiction comics', although she does acknowledge Marvel and DC's commercial success within the comic-book market and therefore their position as the two biggest comic-book companies (Chute, 2008: p.452, 455). The expansion of graphic novels in the 1980s (which are presented in a comic-book format, but read like a book due to a thick spine holding the pages together), adopted the darker tones of comic-book narratives from the 1960s/1970s and predominantly appealed to adult audiences. These novels had by the late-1970s/1980s led to comic-books receiving more recognition as literary texts. The comics-as-literary-texts dispute, as previously mentioned, typically stems from the fact that many critics have not read a comic-book, and if they have, they may have selected one that is

not considered to be as 'critically-acclaimed' as others. For example, comic-book narratives and the choices over artistic styles during the 1990s were problematic and during this time, the comic-book industry suffered a decline in sales (Phillips, 2016: p.126; Wright, 2001: p.283). The innovation of the direct-market in the 1970s saved the comic-book industry, but by the 1990s, it largely excluded mainstream readers. The increase of the comic-collector boom also affected the sales of current comic-books, as collectors understood older materials were more valuable than current releases. Many popular artists at Marvel left the company and created their own, which led to the founding of Image Comics in 1992, prior to the bankruptcy of Marvel in 1996.

The narratives of the film and television properties have to somewhat depend on the popularity of primary source material. However, it does not explain the success, and sometimes failure of the filmic and televised adaptations produced: the movies themselves have to attract viewers that rarely read comics (Lefevre, 2007: p.1). With reference to adaptation, Hutcheon defines it as 'an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works, a creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging, [and] an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work' (Hutcheon, 2013: p.8). In other words, we, the audience, desire the pleasure of recognition and remembrance of an adaptation, in addition to the risk of change (Hutcheon, 2013: p.4). While there have been attempts to envision superhero characters as a singular brand (identity), most characters have been re-interpreted multiple times (Johnson, 2007: p.81). Whether they belong to numerous comic-book titles, films or any other media, it is not unexpected for different iterations of the same superhero to exist.

The continuity in comic-book narratives and universes simultaneously produced a positive and negative for the creators and more importantly, the consumers. On the one hand, it invites consumers to read all the comic-books published by Marvel and DC, and on the other, with the

several decades of continuity already established, it produces errors and contradictions to the continuity of superhero narratives (Darowski, 2014: p.13). The materials produced by Marvel and DC contain multiple universes or 'multiverses' where many comic-book narratives feature in different fictional universes at the same time. Generally, there is a main continuity in which most original storylines take place and experimentation with superhero characters/narratives often take place in a different universe. Ultimately, this produces a culture of revision in which authors and artists contribute a different depiction to a character and/or narrative. Changes in continuity can erase swathes of comic book history, something that was not necessarily addressed in an individual issue of a comic-book series prior to the 1960s. However, since then, much more attention has been paid to the continuity 'issue' with the introduction of cross-over titles, multiverses and reboots (Brooker, 2012: p.157; Smith, 2015: p.54). The role of continuity in DC and Marvel's comic-book narratives were (and still are) confusing for some, yet, cross-over titles became a marketing strategy to interest readers in other superhero titles. McCloud states that 'comics is just *one* of *many* forms of self-expression and communication available to us' (McCloud, 1993: p.162). Therefore, McCloud asserts that comics are a form of self-expression available to readers and audiences. In this sense, it is understandable that superhero characters and narratives are changed and altered, particularly when considering a comic-book's continuity.

### **With Great Popularity, Comes Great Revenue: Spider-Man and the Apex Superhero Concept**

An example of adaptation theory is Spider-Man, as the character's film franchise is being rebooted for the third time in the last fifteen years. Spider-Man's origin story and historical narrative has been re-imagined multiple times within the original comic-book, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963-) [mainstream Marvel Universe/Earth-616], and within other Spider-Man spin-off comics, such as

*Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000-2009) in Earth-1610.<sup>5</sup> Spider-Man's narrative has also been altered within Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* and its sequels, and within Marc Webb's reboot *The Amazing Spider-Man* and its sequel. As a result of Marvel selling Spider-Man to Sony in 1999 and as long as Sony continued to produce Spider-Man films every so often, the rights of Spider-Man and the Spider-Man family remained with Sony. In the 1960s, *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic-book became Marvel's signature symbol, and essentially became Sony's within their film properties (Genter, 2007: p.973). While Sony may have only acquired one Marvel superhero (in addition to the Spider-Man family of characters), in comparison to multiple purchased by Twentieth Century Fox, this single character embodied the most recognisable symbol of Marvel. Subsequently, Sony had attained one of the apex superhero characters, and a substantial revenue-generating icon.<sup>6</sup> Constituting one of the most iconic and popular superhero characters in comic-books and films, and one who is firmly embedded within our culture, Spider-Man is accompanied by the likes of The Incredible Hulk, Captain America, Superman and Batman. What distinguishes Spider-Man from other apex superheroes is his engagement with real-life situations, making him a relatable character. Spider-Man/Peter experiences a sense of loss, especially those who are important to him, he deals with everyday issues, such as money/rent, school and a relationship, and tries to balance his personal life with his crime-fighting alter-ego. Spider-Man/Peter is flawed and awkward, which makes him an interesting protagonist for film and television adaptations.

Raimi's *Spider-Man* film differs from the canonical traits in *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic-book. The most notable difference is Peter Parker/Spider-Man's web-shooters. In the comic-book and second film franchise *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the manufacturing of the web-shooters

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<sup>5</sup> *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* (2011-2013) starred Miles Morales as Spider-Man in Earth-1610.

<sup>6</sup> The term 'apex superheroes' has been coined within this thesis to refer to the superiority and primacy of money-making superheroes in film, television and comic-books.

dramatizes Peter Parker's (Andrew Garfield) mechanical skills and scientific intellect, whereas, in *Spider-Man*, Peter (Tobey Maguire) has the ability to 'organically' release spider webs from his wrists. 'The organic webshooter of Spider-Man in the Sam Raimi film seem to pose a problem for some fans, because in the original comic book version the webshooters were a technological invention of the young scientist Peter Parker' (Lefevre, 2007: p.5). However, Raimi's decision to release spider-webs organically from Peter Parker's wrists was to distinguish a unique contrast to the material of the comic-books. Originally, James Cameron (who at one point produced a script for *Spider-Man*) suggested the idea of organic web-shooters.<sup>7</sup> Other ideas to be included in the film deviated away from the original source material; however, the element of organic web-shooters stuck once Cameron left the project and therefore produced an individual interpretation to the original narrative (Loffhagen, 2016).

They [Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy] are free recensions of the origin story, the feuds with the Green Goblin and Doctor Octopus, and a version of the Mary Jane Watson love story. They are films neither of the original comics, nor the *Ultimate Spider-Man* storyline, but draw freely but sensitively on both versions of the continuity. (Kaveney, 2007: p.251-252).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Spider-Man can temporarily produce organic web-shooters in *Spectacular Spider-Man* #15-16, coinciding with Raimi's franchise.

<sup>8</sup> *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000-2009) was a modern re-imagining of Spider-Man, as part of Marvel's *Ultimate Marvel* imprint set in Earth-1610.



(Fig.1 [Left] The web-shooter invention scene, *The Amazing Spider-Man* [2012]). Still of Andrew Garfield (Peter Parker/Spider-Man). Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0948470/mediaviewer/rm477669888>.

(Fig.2 [Right] Discovering new powers scene [the organic web-shooters], *Spider-Man* [2002]). Still of Tobey Maguire (Peter Parker/Spider-Man). Source: <https://www.inverse.com/article/34072-spider-man-homecoming-peter-parker-powers-spider-sense>.



Referring back to Hutcheon and McCloud, Raimi's interpretation of Spider-Man (particularly his artistic changes which differ from the canon material), recognises specific themes within its narrative which pose similarities to the comic-book, yet expresses a personal creativity and originality to the superhero character. Raimi's version of Spider-Man invites new audiences, without having to know the comic-book interpretation(s). While at the same time, attracting embedded comic-book fans to acknowledge another creative interpretation of Spider-Man. Nevertheless, the matter of corporate pressure was evident within the *Spider-Man* franchise. Raimi has expressed his concerns regarding the third Spider-Man film within his franchise, claiming that he was 'very unhappy with *Spider-Man 3*' and that a fourth instalment was impossible due to not being able to get a script together in time with a deadline to meet (Buchanan, 2013). Raimi did not think he could make a movie the fans deserved within the time-frame available (Browne, 2014). In addition, there was a lot of speculation surrounding the characters/villains who would feature within the fourth film. Sony forced Raimi to shoehorn Venom into *Spider-Man 3*, resulting in Raimi directing a film where he "didn't really believe in all the characters" (Chitwood, 2015; Gajewski, 2014). In addition to this previous experience, and with a limited time-frame to develop a script



for the fourth film, Raimi and Sony opted and envisioned two different villains to appear within the fourth film. Studio interference resulted in Raimi and Sony parting ways, and an announcement regarding a developed script for *The Amazing Spider-Man* franchise shortly after Raimi's departure (Chitwood, 2015).

Sony's decision to preserve a character like Spider-Man (by rebooting the character in *The Amazing Spider-Man* franchise) was prompted by obtaining the rights to the character's adaptation into motion-pictures and to generate another potential profit. 'Marvel has been trying for years to wrest the Spider-Man rights back from Sony, offering billions... But Sony, franchise-starved as it is, eschewed the quick cash to keep its \$4 billion franchise in-house' (Siegel, 2015). It is apparent that from Raimi's adaptation, the *Spider-Man* franchise was financially successful and critically acclaimed, especially when evaluating critics reviews regarding *Spider-Man 2*. *Spider-Man 2* collected \$40 million on its opening day (Rossen, 2008: p.294) (Table 1).<sup>9</sup> The second franchise could be seen as an attempt to relate to dedicated comic-book audiences, with the canon-friendly construction of the web-shooters and relationship between Peter and Gwen Stacy (Emma Stone).<sup>10</sup> However, it is likely that these alterations were an industrial decision made by Sony to produce something different to the preceding franchise, ensuring that audiences are aware of an unrelated 'version' of Spider-Man. In addition to the legal requirements Sony had to abide by, the technological advancements of special effects/CGI dramatically changed in the ten years from the release of *Spider-Man* in the first franchise to the release of *The Amazing Spider-Man* in the second.

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<sup>9</sup> The box office figures have come from the website: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> and have been adjusted to inflation. Films released between 2016 and 2017 have not been adjusted to inflation due to them being recent releases.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst) was the love interest of Spider-Man in the *Spider-Man* trilogy. In the comics, it is after the death of Gwen Stacy, Peter's 'original' love interest, that Peter and Mary Jane eventually become a couple.

*The Amazing Spider-Man 2* failed to generate the same profit/reception as *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and more importantly, its predecessor, ultimately leading to even more comparisons between the two franchises (Table 1).

**TABLE 1**

Film Title	Domestic Gross	Lifetime Theatres	Opening Day	Opening Gross	Worldwide Gross	Opening Theatres
<i>Spider-Man</i> (2002)	\$538,590,083	3,876	\$52,573,236	\$153,215,074	\$1,096,252,386	3,615
<i>Spider-Man 2</i> (2004)	\$474,659,678	4,166	\$51,384,373	\$112,006,943	\$995,814,760	4,152
<i>Spider-Man 3</i> (2007)	\$389,547,841	4,324	\$69,269,513	\$174,923,661	\$1,031,221,008	4,252
<i>The Amazing Spider-Man</i> (2012)	\$273,914,795	4,318	\$36,605,039	\$64,816,847	\$792,305,830	4,318
<i>The Amazing Spider-Man 2</i> (2014)	\$205,656,782	4,324	\$35,652,922	\$92,874,097	\$718,778,388	4,324
<i>Captain America: Civil War</i> (2016)	\$408,084,349	4,226	\$75,502,161	\$179,139,142	\$1,153,304,495	4,226
<i>Spider-Man: Homecoming</i> (2017)	\$333,528,381	4,348	\$50,780,982	\$26,915	\$879,598,965	4,348

One major flaw of *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* was its conclusion with the death of Gwen Stacy. Gail Simone coined the phrase ‘Women in Refrigerators’ in 1999 referring to a list of female comic-book characters who have been injured, killed or depowered in comic-books. This will be discussed in detail within the second sub-section in regards to the portrayal of women superheroes; however, it is important to associate the term with Gwen Stacy’s death. Although true to canon, having been adapted from *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121-122 “The Night Gwen Stacy Died” in June-July 1973, the definitive ending angered many fans and critics, especially in regards to the reception of the whole franchise (Steiner, 2014). Emma Stone’s portrayal of Gwen Stacy provided audiences with an engaging and individual character away from Peter Parker/Spider-Man, someone who could operate in their own way and something which Sony and the filmmakers worked hard to differentiate from ‘damsel-in-distress’ Mary Jane Watson in the previous franchise; then Gwen eventually fell victim to the superhero’s self-exploration. ‘Her death only matters in how it affects the male superhero and how he grows or changes as a result’ (Mendelson, 2014). This is important when analysing superhero films, as the death of an important female character also occurred in *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008), six years prior with the death of Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), and was portrayed in an arguably better way. After the Joker (Heath Ledger) tricks Batman (Christian Bale) into saving Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), Rachel dies in an explosion.

The difference between the deaths of the two supporting female characters is that Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy did not rely too much on the relationship between the superhero and the love-interest (Mendelson, 2014). The tragic death of Rachel reduces Bruce Wayne to his lowest point, yet performs as motivation to stop the Joker's criminal activities in *Gotham* (Mithaiwala, 2016).



(Fig.3 [Left] Gwen Stacy's death scene, *The Amazing Spider-Man* [2014]). Still of Emma Stone (Gwen Stacy). Source: [http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Gwen Stacy \(Earth-120703\)](http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Gwen_Stacy_(Earth-120703)).

(Fig.4 [Right] Gwen Stacy's death in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121-122 [1973]). Source: Google images.



The relationship between Spider-Man and Gwen interested audiences in the franchise, and the death of Gwen, in addition to the emphasis on multiple villains, thus proved problematic (Mendelson, 2014; Dowd, 2014). Fans were angered by Gwen's death as they did not witness the development of Gwen's/Peter's relationship in the same way as others can in the comics, and ultimately effected *The Amazing Spider-Man* franchise overall (Table 1). 'Even those who didn't like either of the films will tell you that they enjoyed the quirky romantic banter between real-life couple Andrew Garfield and Emma Stone' (Mendelson, 2014). For Sony, and director Marc Webb to kill off Gwen Stacy suggests that it was an artistic decision, as opposed to a corporate one. Nevertheless, by producing a range of new Gwen Stacy comic-books, such as *Spider-Gwen* and *The Unbelievable Gwenpool*, Marvel has created different versions of Gwen Stacy, which have both

become internet sensations, popular cosplay characters and proved successful in comic-book sales, therefore providing Marvel with a profit-making scheme and fans with an alive version of Gwen Stacy.<sup>11</sup>

Marvel own the rights to the Spider-Man comic-books, and so profit from all comic-books sold, whereas, Sony can only profit from the films' box office. The potential introduction of the Sinister Six within the second franchise would provide Sony with Gwen's cinematic 'replacement' and Marvel with a profitable assortment of characters. Yet, it would still provide Sony with the creative decisions regarding the production and distribution of the film, and therefore, a profitable sequel. Gwen Stacy's death in the comic-book industry is considered to be the story that finalised the end of the 'Silver Age' and marked the beginning of the 'Bronze Age' of comics (White, 2014). The critical and commercial failure led to the cancellation of the third and fourth instalment, which was confirmed by Sony before *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* was released (Cowden, 2015). Using Spider-Man as a case study confirms an industrial influence over the creativity, production and distribution of superhero narratives.

Sony's decision to reboot Spider-Man in film properties represents their eagerness to generate a profit from an iconic character, as demonstrated in Table 1. In addition, the popularity and profitability of the Spider-Man narratives can contribute to the overall discussion of the resurgence of superhero narratives in film and television. Spider-Man is not the first superhero to have a profitable and successful franchise(s), however, it does outline that the film industry continue to invest in superhero narratives, and in return, financially benefit from them.

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<sup>11</sup> *Spider-Gwen* and *The Unbelievable Gwenpool* are on-going publications within Marvel Comics.

## **'Batman': The Icon a Business Needs, The Hero Audiences Deserve**

Within the modern era and DC Universe, Batman has become the most adapted superhero character in film, television, animated series, video-games and comic-books. The success of Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy and the establishment of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, presumably prompted DC to create their equivalent; the DC Extended Universe with the release of their first title, *Man of Steel* (Synder, 2013). The introduction of the *Justice League* comic-book in 1960 prompted Marvel to create their first superhero team, the Fantastic Four (*Fantastic Four* #1 in 1961) and later, the Avengers (*Avengers* #1 in 1963). Since the release of *Marvel's The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012), DC has announced a *Justice League* (Synder, 2017) film, further implying the potential for superhero team films and the establishment of interconnected universes as a profitable market. Before the establishment of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, DC/Warner Bros. surpassed Marvel with their superhero adaptations in film and television, due to the majority of their films being made under 'in-house' productions (internally, without the assistance from an outside company). The discussion of Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy will be addressed in terms of the themes and representations of society it depicts, and more importantly, the industrial decisions behind the merchandising and advertising for the franchise, whilst also considering Batman as an 'icon', or as Will Brooker suggests, a 'genre' over multiple media platforms (Brooker, 2000: p.328). This section will also consider the transition of the 'camp' 1966 *Batman* television series to the contemporary interpretation of Nolan's Batman. In order to consider the DC Extended Universe and its current and future texts, one must analyse the effect Nolan's trilogy had on the establishment of the shared universe, and thus, determine the industrial factors when analysing the resurgence of superhero narratives.

Batman's persistent popularity lies in the ability of his story to be told and retold in endless and varied iterations. His ability to be continuously transformed and reconstructed extends the

potency and variety of his narrative and allows him to conform to the demands of his audience (Feblowitz, 2009). What differentiates Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy from the standard 'comic-book movie' or specifically, superhero film, is that it is more firmly embedded within our post-9/11 society, and that it does not engage in the playful, pre-adolescent narratives of previous superhero films. That is not stating that other superhero narratives do not engage with reality, however, Nolan's franchise is more thoughtful when confronting serious and darker themes. Nolan's individual artistry has not just met superhero genre expectations, but exceeded them by pushing the boundaries and raising the bar (Brooker, 2012: p.34). The conventions of a superhero genre film are met through the identification of Batman, yet the expectations are raised when exploring the underlying themes of post-9/11 anxieties held by both the audience and the citizens of Gotham, and in a much broader sense, the trilogy engages with a widespread representation of crime and terror. Nolan has found a way to make Batman relevant to his time – meaning, to ours (Dargis, 2008). The *Dark Knight* trilogy was predominantly shot on-location, unlike previous depictions of Gotham City, thus further exemplifying a sense of realism when criminal activities are executed. The noir sensibility accompanies Nolan's emphasis on the human tragedy of Wayne's life than any previous interpretations of the character (Levitz, 2015: p.19). More importantly, it delves into a more engaging and detailed origin story of Wayne becoming Batman and the reasons for protecting 'his' city.

What was promoted as the most authentic and faithful adaptation of the comic-books, Nolan's interpretation of Batman has emerged as the definitive rendition. Warner Bros. used this as a key aspect of their branding when distinguishing Nolan's Batman to his predecessors (Feblowitz, 2009; Brooker, 2012: p.xiii). Not only was this a marketing tool for Warner Bros. to differentiate and promote the new Batman brand from Joel Schumacher's arguably 'worst superhero adaptation' (which was driven by industrial decisions regarding the marketing of toys

and other tie-ins) prior to the release of the first instalment, it also provided Nolan with the chance to independently and artistically explore his interpretation of Batman (Langshaw, 2012). The audience acknowledge Batman from other forms of media, specifically from his origins in comic-books (dating back to *Detective Comics* #27 [1939] and *Batman* #1 [1940]).<sup>12</sup> Referring to Hutcheon's theory, Nolan has identified the characteristics of Batman from the original works from Bob Kane and Bill Finger (in addition to other creative teams since), taking into account Batman's super-human abilities as a genius, a detective and an expert martial artist, yet has re-invented the character to suit contemporary audiences. Wayne witnesses his parents being murdered as a child and it is still a major reason to become Batman later in his life, ultimately leading to his obsessive battle with crime and injustice in the city of Gotham (Ahrens, 2010: p.120). However, within *Batman Begins* (Nolan, 2005), the audience experience the stage between Wayne as a child and Wayne as an older billionaire-turned-vigilante from years of training to overcome his fears and responsibility over the death of his parents. Rather than overlooking this stage, Nolan has produced a version of Batman that is different from previous film iterations.

Batman and the city of Gotham is fictional, yet Nolan engages with real-life situations throughout the trilogy that audiences can identify with. Primarily focusing on the second and third instalment, themes such as post-9/11 anxieties, surveillance and social structure/class feature throughout. In *The Dark Knight*, the "war on terror" is addressed when the Joker threatens the citizens of Gotham, thus carefully portraying post-9/11 visual images throughout the film. While the Joker's motivation is ambiguous, open to interpretation and so difficult to relate to 'terrorism', the activities that he plans, directs and participates in are synonymous with actions associated with modern-day terrorism. These include the Joker's use of bomb threats against citizens and public

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<sup>12</sup> Batman's appearance in both *Detective Comics* and *Batman* is still on-going despite the publication of his self-titled comic-book being a year later.

figures, mass shootings and the holding of hostages. Following the events of 9/11, concerns about the nation's safety dramatically changed, resulting in an expansion in Government oversight through web and network surveillance. This is echoed when Batman uses a surveillance system to detect the Joker's whereabouts, allowing Batman to visualise the locations of criminals through citizen's mobile phones. Although it assists in finding the Joker, there is resistance to using it, expressed by Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), Batman's armorer, stating that the system is "unethical, dangerous..." and how "this is too much power for one person" (*The Dark Knight*, 2008). The scenes surrounding the use of the surveillance system mark the outrage relating to illegal wiretappings carried out on U.S. citizens with no connection to terrorism. The ethical resolution to end the violation in Gotham was to destroy the surveillance system, which Lucius successfully does at the end of the film. Nolan's realistic engagement with terror and crime expresses contemporary concerns held by the audience, thus creating a consistently dark and realistic tone throughout the trilogy.

Within *The Dark Knight Rises*, the subject-matter of social class is examined through Bane's (Tom Hardy) speech to the citizens of Gotham City. Bane reveals the cover-up of the death of District Attorney Harvey Dent in the second instalment and exposes the corruption of the police force and the wealthy upper class. He releases the prisoners of Blackgate Penitentiary and instigates chaos in Gotham City. The upper class have their properties and belongings seized and the 'corrupt police force' are given show trials that result in their death. Despite the lack of faith in Gotham's justice system, it is clear that Bane is not interested in social equality; instead, he and the League of Shadows use this terrorist revolution as a means of obliterating Gotham and all its citizens (Coates, 2012). Overall, Nolan includes consideration of many ethical issues throughout the trilogy, which not only engages with Batman's moral concerns as a vigilante, it also features moral issues concerning the villain's actions. Nolan has adapted a comic-book superhero into a



contemporary real-life environment, yet still delivers a fictional universe in which the Caped Crusader can operate. Nolan draws freely on the Batman comic-books, but presents him within a realistic setting.

(Fig.5 [Right] Joker destroys the hospital scene, *The Dark Knight* [2008]). Still of Heath Ledger (Joker). Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/mediaviewer/rm2994996224>.



(Fig.6 [Left] Bane releases Blackgate's prisoners scene, *The Dark Knight Rises* [2012]). Still of Tom Hardy (Bane). Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1345836/mediaviewer/rm1425256448>.

The viral marketing campaigns for the second and third instalment for Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy created a more immersive Gotham City. The campaign created an artful reality game which incorporated a wide range of old and new media forms of textuality, from websites, to graffiti, to scavenger hunts, to cellphones hidden in cakes, to campaign buses (Collins, 2015: p.167). Millions of participants in over 70 countries joined several events which gave fans the chance to involve themselves in the City of Gotham for the promotion of the second instalment (Dorman, 2015). In addition, a promotional campaign was launched to advertise the second film with the introduction of the 'Gotham City Pizza' in collaboration with Domino's Pizza. A viral marketing campaign to

promote *The Dark Knight Rises* was also implemented, thereby repeating the same success of the previous campaign. With an arrest warrant for Batman, graffiti drawings of bats left around the world and the ultimate reveal of the final trailer for the third instalment, Warner Bros. employed similar tactics to the campaign of the previous instalment (The Week Staff, 2012). Collaborations with Domino’s Pizza and Mountain Dew created products and websites that revealed hints about the film and created giveaways for anyone who purchased their items. The commercial intent was to advertise the film and generate a greater return for it and all of its related merchandise (Table 2), which it successfully executed (Collins, 2015: p.167).<sup>13</sup>

**TABLE 2**

Film Title	Domestic Gross	Lifetime Theatres	Opening Day	Opening Gross	Worldwide Gross	Opening Theatres
<i>Batman: The Movie</i> (1966)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Batman</i> (1989)	\$486,186,291	2,201	\$29,764,315	\$78,369,536	\$796,182,429	2,194
<i>Batman Returns</i> (1992)	\$278,551,300	2,644	\$30,970,452	\$78,156,596	\$456,444,994	2,644
<i>Batman Forever</i> (1995)	\$289,821,228	2,893	\$31,570,151	\$83,127,516	\$529,982,613	2,842
<i>Batman &amp; Robin</i> (1997)	\$160,490,954	2,942	\$24,098,427	\$64,110,438	\$356,207,955	2,934
<i>Batman Begins</i> (2005)	\$254,203,951	3,858	\$18,517,736	\$59,903,978	\$459,882,750	3,858
<i>The Dark Knight</i> (2008)	\$596,228,434	4,366	\$74,871,656	\$176,587,715	\$1,119,822,104	4,366
<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i> (2012)	\$468,463,987	4,404	\$79,190,683	\$168,184,173	\$1,134,145,397	4,404
<i>Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice</i> (2016)	\$330,360,194	4,256	\$81,558,505	\$166,007,347	\$873,260,194	4,242
<i>The LEGO Batman Movie</i> (2017)	\$174,319,215	4,088	\$14,493,258	\$53,003,468	\$307,319,215	4,088

However, the promotional campaigns attached to film releases can also weaken the box office returns if the campaign is not thoroughly examined. Burton’s *Batman Returns* promotional campaign was met with controversial reactions, as the campaign was with McDonald’s Happy Meal items, the direct market primarily being children and/or families. Burton’s disagreements with Warner Bros. surrounding the certificate and content within the film was well under-way before McDonald’s even considered promoting the ‘family-friendly’ film, demonstrating corporate pressure and the effects of potential profits surrounding the film. McDonald’s endorsement was based upon a rough-cut copy of the film and considering the violent content, backlash from parents ensued (Chapman, 2017). The disastrous promotional campaign for *Batman Returns* may have

<sup>13</sup> The box office figures have come from the website: [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com) and have been adjusted to inflation. Films released between 2016 and 2017 have not been adjusted to inflation due to them being recent releases.

contributed to the departure of Burton as director as well as the lower box-office returns in comparison to *Batman* (Table 2). The licensing of a brand like Batman can cause complications for all companies involved. Disney and Warner Bros. grant licenses to brands like LEGO to produce themed sets, such as *Star Wars* or *Batman* sets. These licensors approve the work produced by brands like LEGO to ensure compatibility with their own brand objectives, as well as obtaining the power to revoke certification privileges (Johnson, 2014: p.319). LEGO can capture the most recognisable aspects of Batman and attempt to combine them into their own playsets. While LEGO can incite feelings of nostalgia through their *Batman* sets, and therefore capitalise on this, the existence of multiple 'Batmen' can cause problems for the licensor (Warner Bros.). For example, LEGO's 2008 *Batman* playsets were made to coincide with the release of *The Dark Knight* film (which was released a month after the sets), yet some of the *Batman* playsets did not reflect the plot of Nolan's film. Therefore, the distribution of LEGO's licensed products can support or contrast with the messages of the licensors current Batman texts/interpretation of Batman. On the other hand, the marketing for Schumacher's lighter and family-friendly instalments were well thought-out. Similarly, *The Lego Batman Movie's* (McKay, 2017) promotional campaign with McDonald's Happy Meal items and with LEGO's licensed products repeated a similar success. The Happy Meal toys and the *LEGO Batman* playsets were directed toward the child and family market, like the film itself, and has produced an increasing profit since its release (Table 2).

Since Nolan's trilogy, the direction of DC/Warner Bros.' superhero live-action narratives have continued to operate in a dark and realistic style. However, DC have revisited the camp characteristics of the 1966 *Batman* television series with the release of *Batman '66* in 2013 and *Batman: Return of the Caped Crusaders* (Morales, 2016). Lasting until 2016, the comic-book features Adam West as Batman and Burt Ward as Robin, and performs as a continuation of the television series despite the New 52 relaunch in 2011. The reprisal of their roles is also featured

within the animated film, *Batman: Return of the Caped Crusaders*. The New 52 reboot (and since DC's Rebirth) and DC Extended Universe provided DC/Warner Bros. with a shared universe, similar to Marvel's. The preservation of the camp themes from the television show provides DC readers with a lighter 'version' of Batman and fans of the television show with a nostalgic comic-book narrative(s). The *Batman* television series has created an extension of the camp method within its translated text. To understand the transition of the camp Adam West incarnation of Batman in comparison to the dark and troubled Christian Bale portrayal, one must consider the culture surrounding the television show and Batman as an 'icon'.

The *Batman* television series (1966-1968) emerged at the end of nearly two decades of controversy surrounding the quality of children's television (Spigel & Jenkins, 2015: p.181). In addition to Wertham's comic-book crusade, the birth of pop art emerged during the late-1950s, creating a problematic period. ABC approached William Dozier to recommend new ideas after struggling to produce comparable ratings to rival networks NBC and CBS. Dozier saw the potential for reinterpreting Batman through these new cultural lenses for television (Levitz, 2015: p.16). Dozier bought some Batman comic-books and decided to exaggerate the material for television, creating entertainment for adults and adventure for children. *Batman*, therefore, had two distinct audience groups – adults who understood the programme through camp reception practices, and children who interpreted *Batman* as a fantasy portrayal of real life (Spigel & Jenkins, 2015: p.177).

Before the television show, Batman was already a well-known character within DC's comic-books, for example, the Batman titles of the 1960s predominantly featured in the top twenty prior

to the television show.<sup>14</sup> For some, the show may have provided readers/audiences with a theatrical interpretation of Batman; a lighter tone in comparison to Batman's stories within the comics of the late-1930s. For others, it may have provided them with the nostalgia of reading the *Batman* comic-books. The tone of the *Batman* comic-books in the mid-1960s were lighter than what was depicted in earlier issues, which may have influenced Dozier to increase the comical characteristics in the television show (Cecchini, 2017). While the serials of the 1940s translated Batman into other mediums, they did not produce the same successful recognition the *Batman* television series achieved. Batmania had circulated and by 1966, the television show had almost doubled the figures of the *Batman* comic in a year.<sup>15</sup> The success of the television series immediately fed back into the comics. The comics never quite descended into comedy within the comic-books narrative, however, the work of comic-book artist Carmine Infantino altered the covers, which adopted the humour and took the extreme sound effects and poses from the show (Levitz, 2015: p.17; Cecchini, 2017). The television show ran successfully for three series, resulting in a total of 120 episodes and the first feature film, *Batman: The Movie* (Martinson, 1966).<sup>16</sup> By the end of series three, ratings were decreasing and eventually ABC cancelled the show. Batman's proposed dual address (pop characteristics and camp) was far more than just a stylistic take on the comic-books: it was a careful economic decision to suit the time-period (Brooker, 2000: p.196).

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<sup>14</sup> Comichron Website Sales Figures for *Batman* and *Detective Comics* in 1965 feature *Batman* at #9 and *Detective Comics* at #19, a year before the television show airs: <http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales/postaldata/1965.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Comichron Website Sales Figures for *Batman* in 1966 featuring the comic-book at #1: <http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales/postaldata/1966.html>.

<sup>16</sup> *Batman: The Movie* was originally meant to be released before the premiere of the first series, however, the series was brought forward and the film premiered in theatres before the second series of the television show aired.

The passing trend of the camp aesthetic in the television series resulted in a more contemporary and recognisable 'Dark Knight' character of the late-1980s/1990s graphic novels. This interpretation of Batman has influenced Zack Snyder's depiction of Batman (Ben Affleck) in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder, 2016) which continued from the dark and realistic themes that are distinguishable in Nolan's trilogy. Previously, however, the darker themes of Miller's and Moore's interpretation was adopted by Tim Burton for *Batman* (Burton, 1989), the first adaptation of Batman in live-action properties since the television show. Warner Bros. knew that they were getting Burton's Batman, and with this, sensed the market for a 'personal vision' given the popularity of the *Dark Knight* and the *Killing Joke* graphic-novel (Brooker, 2000: p.292). For around twenty-years, Batman was untouched. Burton's Batman had become 'the' Batman, in the eyes of the wider-audience, and worked hard to distance itself from its predecessor, further exemplifying the difference from his interpretation to the Batman of the television series, thus creating the consideration of multiple 'Batmen' within certain texts (Brooker, 2000: p.293; p.147). Schumacher's *Batman Forever* (Schumacher, 1995) and *Batman & Robin* (Schumacher, 1997) captured the 'camp' themes of the *Batman* television series. These films provided audiences with 'the worst movie ever' (coming from the perspective of entrenched white male comic-book fans) from its neon set design and dramatic styles, which in turn, killed the Batman franchise (Eisenberg, 2015).<sup>17</sup> The issues circulating around Batman during the 1950s and 1960s were being reworked in the 1990s (Brooker, 2000: p.317). This was applicable for many of the live-action superhero films released during the 1990s. However, *Batman: The Animated Series* (Fox Network, 1992-1995), was similar to the dark tone of Burton's films, ran parallel with the release of *Batman Forever* which, despite its reception, allowed for multiple Batmen to operate in different universes/narratives to those of the 'official' comic-book narrative, therefore appealing to different audiences. Similarly,

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<sup>17</sup> Empire Magazine, 2010. *The 50 Worst Movies Ever*. Available at: <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/50-worst-movies-ever/> [Accessed: 17/03/17] (Article updated: 20/06/16) Referring to *Batman & Robin*.

the comedic and light-hearted action/adventure film, *The Lego Batman Movie* was only distributed a year after *Batman v Superman*. Overall, 'Batman' as a genre and as an icon could embrace variation and improvisation around its core template, adapting to survive as Batman has always adapted to survive, both in Gotham and the real world (Brooker, 2000: p.328).



(Fig. 7 [Left] Batman and Robin in the Batcave scene, *Batman* television series [1966-1968]). Still of Adam West (Batman) and Burt Ward (Robin).  
Source:  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0059968/mediaviewer/rm3039426560>.

(Fig. 8 [Right] Batman in the club, scene, *Batman Forever* [1995]). Still of Val Kilmer (Batman).  
Source:  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112462/mediaviewer/rm3002476800>.



Similar to the discussion concerning Spider-Man, Batman is considered an apex superhero within the DC Universe and the superhero genre, specifically in regards to the adapted texts. Batman is an icon and therefore, can be moulded to suit different audiences, as long as the core template is intact. Batman serves as a property that is appealing to different audiences, and will continue to adapt if it is financially successful for DC/Warner Bros. Regarding live-action films, the noir-inspired texts of the graphic novels will serve as source material for the upcoming *Justice League* film and will likely feature within other DC Extended Universe live-action properties, considering previous successes. The Marvel Cinematic Universes' live-action properties typically derive from Marvel's 'Silver Age' comic-book narratives, whereas, the DC Extended Universe film

and television properties draw from the 'Bronze' and 'Modern/Dark Age' comic-books. However, it is evident that the film and television industry have provided audiences with distinct versions of superheroes and their narratives. For example, Schumacher drew inspiration from the *Batman* television series and the work from comic-book artist Richard 'Dick' Sprang, distancing itself from Burton's gothic-like instalments. Likewise, the Marvel/Netflix television properties draw similarities to the tones of the comic-book and graphic novel properties from the 'Bronze' and 'Modern/Dark Age', differentiating itself from Marvel's lighter blockbuster films, whilst still occupying the same cinematic universe (Boone, 2016). When it comes to adapting superhero narratives from comic-book properties to film and television productions, it is evident that Warner Bros. and Disney have plenty of material to choose from, and therefore can provide individual interpretations to suit different audiences. The studios' inclination to appeal to mainstream audiences while also retaining an interest from entrenched comic-book fans is apparent, and also vital when considering their eagerness to make a profit on the superhero narratives they distribute. The adaptation of comic-books to film and television texts appeals to different audiences, and from this, generates audience and fan response, which is then demonstrated by the profitability of the narratives.



## **REPRESENTATION**

The representation of female characters and superheroines in comic-books is usually labelled as 'tricky'. Charlotte E. Howell investigates this term as DC Entertainment producers and executives frequently described Wonder Woman as such (Howell, 2015: p.141). This corresponds with the comments made by video game publisher Ubisoft, after it was revealed that *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2014) would not feature a female protagonist as it would double the animations in order to create a female lead (Mey, 2014).<sup>1</sup> The hashtag #womenaretoohardtoanimate trended on social media sites, particularly because women represent almost half of the gaming population and the *Assassin's Creed* franchise featured a woman of colour in a previous instalment (Rosenberg, 2013; Mey, 2014).

Throughout history, women have been assigned to character roles which correspond with their stereotypical position within society at a particular time. The female role in the comic-book medium generally allows the woman to perform either as a superheroine or a secondary character to the protagonist. As previously mentioned, a secondary character like Gwen Stacy operates as a victim of Spider-Man's self-exploration, while a superheroine like Wonder Woman performs as the lead-role, depending on the title. Women in comic-books are often portrayed in one of two ways: They are either helpless and in need of rescue by a hero, or they are powerful and/or key characters in a story (Garland, 2016: p.52). While Tammy Garland is accurate in illustrating a woman's role in superhero narratives, their portrayal as a sexual spectacle, whether as an active superheroine or secondary character often further diminishes their power or role (Goodrum, 2014: p.101; Cocca, 2014: p.411). Historically, the comic-book industry and the adapted texts generally appealed to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Double the animations' refers to the extra production work (and money) the publisher would have to implement in order to create a female avatar.

pre-teen and young adult male audiences. Up to the 1950s, a much broader selection of comic-book genres (including the superhero genre) were produced by major comic-book companies, and females of all ages represented nearly half of comic-book readers (Lavin, 1998: p.93). The large demographic of female readers during this time was primarily due to the popularity of the romance genre, and were often geared to portray stereotypical job-roles, such as career girls (e.g. nurses and models) or the cheerful teenage girl. In comparison, the industry's audience during the 1990s remained narrow and predominantly male. Comic-book creators had presumed that the audience for superheroes was overwhelmingly male and therefore targeted adolescent male lusts, rather than female readers (Wright, 2001: p.280, 250). Currently, the comic-book industry's demographic is almost an equal split among readers (Schenker, 2017). The romance comic-books of the 1950s mediated what women and girls desired to become, or at least were supposed to desire within the patriarchal framework of the period. While the stereotypical depictions of women did not pose much of a problem (in comparison to now), it was the general sexualisation of their bodies that created an impossible standard of feminine beauty in the romance genre that did. Given the time-period, where the majority of comic-book narratives were helmed by white middle-class men, these representations, specifically in romance comic-books were deemed acceptable (Goodrum, 2016: p.46, 92).

The superhero genre introduced its first superheroine: Wonder Woman in *All-Star Comics* #8 in 1941. Wonder Woman is the only superheroine who has continuously been published in DC comic-book history.<sup>2</sup> Superheroines regularly appeared in shared comic-book titles with a male superhero or they featured within collection titles. However, if a superhero proved to be popular enough, she would get a book of her own (Lavin, 1998: p.94). In the case of Wonder Woman, it

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<sup>2</sup> This is with the exception of a brief hiatus in 1986 with DC's "Crisis on Infinite Earths" crossover title.

was likely due to her alleged high sales prior to the publication of her self-titled comic-book (Berlatsky, 2015: p.10). The crime, horror, romance and superhero comic-book titles of the 1940s/1950s often portrayed women characters and superheroines as sex objects and secondary characters to the male lead. Wertham's crusade predominantly analysed juvenile delinquency as a result of crime and horror comic-books, but he also cited depictions of sexual violence/themes within a variety of comic-book genres (Beaty, 2005: p.140). His critique, although somewhat exaggerated, spoke honestly when analysing the woman's role and representation/sexualisation in comic-book publication, specifically within superhero narratives.

During the 'Silver Age', superhero titles became the leading genre, and the depiction of women reverted back to stereotypical role's during the early-1960s. Prior to the emergence of second-wave feminism, many gendered stereotypes and images of sexual violence circulated within superhero narratives (Garland, 2016: p.54).<sup>3</sup> For example, Lois Lane featured as a love-interest and secondary character to Superman, and while she worked as a career-minded reporter for the *Daily Planet*, her central interests revolved around competing for Superman's affections in various late-1950s/early-1960s storylines. Moreover, Lois performed as the damsel-in-distress, 'who is constantly in need of rescue by Superman, and who yearns for little more than to be his wife' (Lavin, 1998: p.94). The prominence of Superman led to Lois' comic-book title featuring her as the protagonist, which was highly successful in sales during the early-1960s (Hanley, 2014: p.114).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Second-wave feminism emerged during the early-1960s-1980s.

<sup>4</sup> *Lois Lane, Girl Reporter* was a back-up feature in the *Superman* comic-book (1944-1946). *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* (1958-1974) presented a problematic approach to a secondary character gaining an 'independent' comic-book title, as although her focus is presented as her career, the presence of Superman in the title and various storylines reverts the focus back to her relationship with Superman.

Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is often recognised as the beginning of second-wave feminism in America. By the late-1960s, the foundation had been created for a widespread assault on traditional attitudes and values regarding sex roles, yet, the representation of women in comic-books continued to be problematic (Chafe, 2000: p.553). In 1968, Wonder Woman was stripped of her title and super-powers where the narrative focused more on her alter-ego Diana Prince (Hanley, 2014: p.168-169).<sup>5</sup> Wonder Woman/Diana Prince engaged with several stereotypical female roles, and while this will be explained in greater detail throughout this subsection, it should be noted that the removal of Wonder Woman's super-powers led to a debate amongst feminists and fans as to whether this was a positive alteration to the character (Lavin, 1998: p.97). For example, Gloria Steinem, the co-founder of *Ms.* magazine, feminist and fan of Wonder Woman complained to DC while visiting about the de-powerment of Wonder Woman, stating: "Don't you realize how important this is to the young women of America?" (Lepore, 2014: p.287).<sup>6</sup> The stereotyping and over-sexualisation of female characters and superheroines has always posed a prominent issue for the comic-book industry over time; however, the graphic novels and comic-books of the 1990s/2000s raised greater issues surrounding the exaggerated features and anatomically incorrect/desired female body.

While the representation of superheroines and female characters are problematic, specifically the exaggeration of their bodies, male sexualisation and objectification in certain superhero narratives is also prominent. This distinguishable sexualisation ran parallel with the

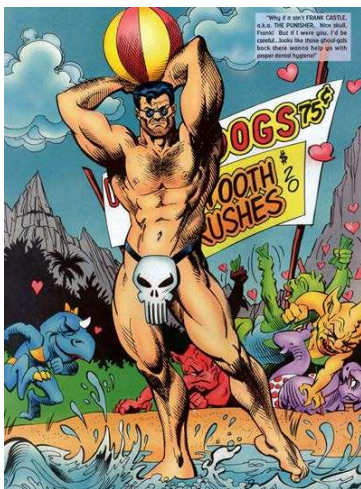
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Comichron Website Sales for *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* in 1965 featuring the comic-book at #3: <http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales/postaldata/1965.html>.

<sup>5</sup> *Wonder Woman* Vol 1 #179 "Wonder Woman's Last Battle" (December, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> The first regular issue of *Ms.* magazine featured Wonder Woman on the cover.

high-point of female over-sexualisation. The comic-books of the 1990s/2000s portrayed male superheroes in sexualised ways, and occasionally depicted them as victims of sexual assault and rape. The *Mighty Marvel Swimsuit Specials* which were distributed yearly between the early and mid-1990s provided readers with issues of their favourite villains and superheroes in tropical environments. The sexualisation of the male form in the specials is often portrayed through the exaggeration of their physique and lack of clothing. Surprisingly, for some superheroines and villainesses in the swimsuit specials, their swimsuits were less revealing than their actual costumes they are often depicted in within the comic-books (Sims, 2009). These portrayals depicted male superheroes/villains in swimwear that would indicate who they were through a recognisable logo or symbol on their swimsuit, yet, the material covering their genitals was limited. While this particular example can be categorised as sexualisation, character agency (the ability to make decisions and effect the narrative) also illustrates an important difference when comparing male sexualisation to the over-sexualisation of female characters/superheroines. Female characters and superheroines are often subjected to existing as passive/secondary characters to the male superhero within many narratives. Additionally, the sexualisation of the male anatomy can also conform to traditional masculine ideals such as physical strength, resiliency and phallic power (Brown, 2016: p.134).



(Fig. 9 Frank Castle (Punisher) on vacation on Monster Island [1993]). Source: <http://comicsalliance.com/marvel-comics-swimsuit-editions/>.

There have been attempts in the past to 'normalise' superheroines in terms of their role and appearance as a superhero, but, they occasionally go unnoticed. Chris Claremont's reinvention of superheroines introduced powerful and independent portrayals of characters like Storm, Kitty Pryde and Jean Grey (in various X-Men titles) during the late-1970s (Wheeler, 2013). However, "The Dark Phoenix Saga" (1980) storyline challenged the powerful portrayal of Jean Grey. Jean lost control of her powers, which provided her with violent impulses, and was consumed by the Phoenix Force, renaming herself Dark Phoenix. She sacrificed herself in order to destroy the Phoenix Force. However, this conforms to the notion that women cannot handle power, especially when it occurs in a traditionally masculine domain (Heldman, 2016: p.11). Simone recently modified the *Birds of Prey* title (1999-2014) consisting of an all-superheroine group.<sup>7</sup> Stereotypical depictions of female characters and superheroines, in addition to acts of violence against them and the over-sexualisation of female characters all contribute to the problematic and 'tricky' implications associated with superheroines and the result of a small female readership. Although these issues still exist in a number of superhero narratives, notably the over-sexualisation of women/superheroines and female characters as victims due to physical abuse, these portrayals have started to slowly decrease over time. Certain superhero narratives/titles have challenged this, highlighting that the treatment of women in superhero narratives has improved since their emergence in the 'Golden Age'.

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<sup>7</sup> *Birds of Prey* was renamed *Batgirl and the Birds of Prey* as part of DC's Rebirth reboot in 2016 and is now written by sister writers Julie and Shawna Benson.

### **Extra small capes and double-D breastplates: The over-sexualisation and exaggeration of female characters and superheroines**

The commercial purpose for the depiction of female characters as sex objects could be argued as a means to interest the 'traditional target market' into reading and/or watching superhero narratives that feature a female protagonist/superheroine or female associated text. Superheroes in popular culture are themselves gendered with a "hyper-masculine character presentation of male characters and a hyper-fetishized and hyper-sexualized presentation of female characters" (Taber, 2014: p.143). Superheroes and their narratives have always embodied hegemonic masculine ideas, where the heterosexual male reader/audience typically identifies with the hyper-masculine superhero as an idol, and the female character/superheroine as a sexually desirable object or girlfriend/love-interest (Brown, 2016: p.131). The over-sexualisation and exaggerated features of the female form are an industrial strategy to extend the male's interest, whether it is the continued purchasing of female featured/dominated comic-books or interest in superhero film and/or television narratives. In comparison, homosexual readers/audiences have the ability to sexualise male bodies in the same way that heterosexual males sexualise women's bodies. Only a small amount of male superheroes are sexualised, both by the readers and within the narrative in a similar way that superheroines/female characters are. These characters include Superman and Nightwing/Dick Grayson. Nightwing in particular is portrayed as a straight character in the comic-books, yet some indications made by the creative teams and readers suggest that Nightwing/Dick Grayson may be gay or bisexual (Charles, 2015). There were editorial pushes to strengthen Nightwing/Dick Grayson's popularity with women and homosexuals, which resulted in more sexualised poses and relationship teases (Downey, 2015). Superhero narratives attract readers/audiences through a variety of reasons, including ideological investment, escapism and enjoyment. How the characters are drawn and what costumes they wear emphasises their sex and accentuates a desired male/female physique, and can be argued as an additional consideration to the above factors.

Historically, Wonder Woman has been a target of over-sexualisation and a victim of the exaggeration of her physique in a number of different ways. Wonder Woman was created as a strong character who also possessed womanly characteristics. As a liberated and powerful superheroine, William Marston initially intended Wonder Woman as an indicator of the women who would eventually come to rule the world, and as an invitation for men to accept their loving authority (Lepore, 2014: p.187).<sup>8</sup> Wonder Woman regularly saved Captain Steve Trevor, carrying him in her arms as a male superhero would a woman, saved helpless women from imminent death and destruction, while also attempting to empower women to look after themselves and discover their own physical and economic strengths (Emad, 2006: p.959). Wonder Woman's creator(s) openly spoke about the subject-matter of BDSM, which bled into the *Wonder Woman* comic-book. Quite often, many images and panels featured Wonder Woman tying up her enemies, or herself being tied up by allies or enemies during the 'Marston era' (Berlatsky, 2015: p.117).

Wonder Woman's magical golden lasso (which compels anyone it encircles to tell the truth and obey Wonder Woman's commands) led to some critics viewing the lasso as an erotic symbol of sexual control (Lavin, 1998: p.95). Wonder Woman as a feminist icon/role model and Wonder Woman as a subject of bondage existed simultaneously. Wonder Woman has been a symbol of feminism and what it means to be a strong woman (Hanley, 2014: p.245). Wonder Woman's origin story was updated in 1958 (*Wonder Woman* #98) and provided readers with a fleshed-out version of her super-powers, comparing her strength to Hercules and tapping into Greek mythology. Wonder Woman temporarily lost her super-powers at the height of the second-wave feminist

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<sup>8</sup> William Marston, his wife, Elizabeth Marston and Olive Byrne (who were all in a polyamorous relationship with one another) co-created Wonder Woman.



movement in 1968, yet she still functioned as a feminist icon for many women. Powerful superheroines such as Wonder Woman are often depicted as sex objects, therefore contradicting associations are drawn concerning Wonder Woman's identity (Lavin, 1998: p.94).<sup>9</sup>

Wonder Woman's costume has become more revealing in recent narratives, therefore categorising her as an over-sexualised superheroine in order to entice more male audiences. Although this is evident for many superheroines and female characters in the superhero genre, it is more noticeable for a character like Wonder Woman, given the lengthy time-span and position as an apex superheroine. Between the 1940s and 1950s, the character wore a red bustier with a golden eagle on her chest and blue star spangled shorts/culotte. Wonder Woman's female body blends spheres of femininity and nation through the costuming of American iconography: golden eagles, the stars and stripes, red, white and blue colours (Emad, 2006: p.955). During the early-1960s the costume of the 'Golden Age' was replaced with a more recognisable body suit, embodying the same American iconography as before. Stripping Wonder Woman of her powers in 1968, at the height of second-wave feminism led to multiple outfit changes, by wearing fashionable clothes of the era (Keating, 2015). During this time, comic-book narratives moved towards relevant themes of the time. The iconic costume returned in 1972 and was later popularised by the debut of the first live-action Wonder Woman adaptation. The impact of the *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979) television series, specifically Lynda Carter's portrayal, led to even more associations to Wonder Woman as a sex object. Lynda Carter was once quoted stating that she "never meant to be a sexual object" when acknowledging the famously arousing Wonder Woman poster (Lynda Carter in The

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<sup>9</sup> Restoration of Wonder Woman's powers occurred in 1973 and three updated versions of Wonder Woman's origin story has occurred, one in the mid-1980s, one in 2011 and one in 2016.

Tuscaloosa News, 1980). Essentially, the television series fed back into the comic-books where Wonder Woman was a desired superheroine by many male fans.

Until George Perez's reinterpretation of Wonder Woman's origin story in 1987, following the events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, the superheroine's costume remained very much the same. Perez's interpretation gave Wonder Woman long curly hair and replaced the eagle on her bustier with a golden double-W. In addition, she was portrayed as having more of a muscular figure than in previous illustrations (Keating, 2015). Wonder Woman lost her title and her costume in the mid-1990s, and was portrayed wearing a black skimpy outfit before another redesign in 2010, resembling a similar outfit to the iconic ensemble, but darker in colour and with trouser legs and a jacket as opposed to exposed arms and legs. The black costume coincided with the overt sexiness of the 1990s and, in addition to the storyline in "The Contest", where Diana Prince lost her title to Amazonian Artemis, constituted an effort to reinvigorate the comic-book's readership (Keating, 2015). The re-designs of 2010, 2011 and 2016 were subsequent to the industrial decisions to reboot the franchise, and therefore, alter continuity (Keating, 2015). The late-1980s/early-1990s saw Wonder Woman's body as toned and muscular, a symbol of power, with a determined expression and functional costume that appealed to an increasing female readership, aligning femininity with physical power (Emad, 2006: p.974). Before her redesigns in 2010 and 2011, where Wonder Woman's costume shifted from 'covered-up' to a similar version to the 'original', the late-1990s/early-2000s depicted Wonder Woman in a hyper-sexualised way; one where Wonder Woman had 'impossibly long legs, a minuscule waist, breasts that jutted out like torpedoes, and a perpetual sexy glare' (Hanley, 2014: p.232). Other than the one-shot comic-book by Trina Robbins et al "Wonder Woman: The Once and Future Story" in 1998, the depiction of Wonder Woman as an over-sexualised superheroine continued until the early-2000s. Trina Robbins, the first woman

to draw Wonder Woman in 1986, has criticised the hyper-sexualisation of Wonder Woman and acknowledged that every comic she drew/wrote included a feminist narrative (Barnhardt, 2017).



(Fig.10 Evolution of Wonder Woman's costume in comic-books). Source: Google images.

The over-sexualisation of Wonder Woman over time, both through her costume and the exaggeration of her figure, has developed complications when understanding what Wonder Woman represents. The late-1980s/early-1990s saw Wonder Woman portrayed as a visibly strong (toned and muscular) superheroine. By the late-1990s/early-2000s, Wonder Woman's physique focused more on the desired female body as opposed to the muscular portrayal, which further contributed to the tricky implications tied to Wonder Woman's character. Considering the industry's heteronormative readings of Wonder Woman, and the male-dominated readership during the 1990s/early-2000s, the decision to alter the bodies of female characters/superheroines like Wonder Woman increasingly accommodated entrenched fans (as well as adding to the preconceived notion that comic-book readers exist primarily as male readers) and marginalised other potential readers. Additionally, the series' quality and sales performed moderately (Hanley, 2014: p.232). The distinct storylines (and inconsistencies) and over-sexualisation of Wonder Woman, toward the end of William Messner-Loeb and Mike Deodato's run, in addition to the quality of John Byrne and Eric Luke's run in the 1990s disappointed many fans (Cereno, 2015). The female market that they once began to attract declined when the body modifications became too extreme for a female reader to accept, especially when it taints the character's role as an

empowered female.<sup>10</sup> Feminism and the status of a role model to young girls is associated with Wonder Woman, yet, the *Wonder Woman* title maintains a diverse readership among genders. Marston created Wonder Woman in hopes of appealing to female readers, yet her initial audience clearly includes adults of both genders and continues to attract a diverse readership of newcomers and entrenched fans (Jorgensen, 2013: p.269; Emad, 2006: p.961; Steinberg, 2017). Therefore, the over-sexualisation of women causes complications when understanding who Wonder Woman is.

Hyper-sexualising superheroines' bodies assures that female power is reigned in. By placing women as subjects of bondage or other suggestive depictions, they no longer pose a threat to masculinity without becoming too 'masculine' themselves (Emad, 2006: p.982). Unlike Wonder Woman, Catwoman and Harley Quinn are anti-heroines/villainesses within the DC multiverse, and despite the obvious distinction, they still suffer from over-sexualisation of their physique and costume design. The femme fatale characteristic of Catwoman introduced contradictions surrounding gender in comic-books. Catwoman's exercise of authority over her gang and her resistance to Batman suggested, for some women, the possibility of feminine power (Pearson, 1991: p.138).<sup>11</sup> In comparison to her predecessors, the sexualisation of Catwoman/Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway) in *The Dark Knight Rises* is considerably less. However, without Wayne's alter-ego existing (by the end of the film), Catwoman/Selina becomes his rebound and therefore the narrative's prize (Rasmus, 2012).

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<sup>10</sup> *Catwoman* Vol. 2 (1993-2001) was developed due to the popularity of Michelle Pfeiffer's portrayal in *Batman Returns* and had a larger female readership than most other DC titles, yet she was rendered as an obvious sex symbol, much to the displeasure of readers: <http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/1995/1995-08Diamond.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Catwoman runs a gang in the *Batman* television series.

Burton's Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) was the second Catwoman to appear in a feature film (*Batman Returns*). The film was a commercial success and has been celebrated for being one of the best portrayals of Catwoman/Selina Kyle (Thomas, 2015) (Table 2). Despite her critically-acclaimed performance as Catwoman, the sexualisation of her stitched S&M-styled cat-suit portrayed Pfeiffer as a sex-symbol. The choice of weapon was the bondage-style whip that is used in the *Batman* and *Catwoman* comic-books. The sexy persona of Catwoman mirrored the comic-book material without over-sexualising the character too much. Kyle's shy personality is only transformed when she discovers sexual confidence as Catwoman. Sexual subjectivity was a much-debated topic in regards to third-wave feminism, yet one of many feminists' projects was to reclaim for women an *active* sexuality, defined autonomously by women's own desires (Cameron, 1996: p.212).<sup>12</sup> Considering the release of *Batman Returns*, and the beginnings of third-wave feminism, it is understandable why some would see Kyle's transformation into Catwoman as sexually empowering.



(Fig.11 Unused Catwoman scene, *Batman Returns* [1992]). Still of Michelle Pfeiffer (Catwoman). Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103776/mediaviewer/rm2349891584>.

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<sup>12</sup> Third-wave feminism began in the 1990s after the end of the second-wave, and emerged out of the understanding that women are of many races, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds. Third-wave feminism challenges the stereotypes against women and the ways in which women are portrayed in media, in addition to public discussions about the rape and abuse of women, access to contraception and the enforcement of sexual-harassment policies in the workplace amongst other subject matters.

The over-sexualisation of superheroines/anti-heroines/villainesses during the late-1990s/early-2000s featured as a popular trend in both comic-book titles and within films, most notably within the action/adventure genre. Moreover, the appearance of a muscular heroine figure had also become a new stereotype for women in the action/adventure genre (Tasker, 1993: p.132). While the representation of women in the action/adventure genre was starting to improve, especially when considering the number of female-led roles in the early-1990s, in addition to the masculinisation of the female body, the representation of women started to become more sexualised towards the end of the decade/early-2000s. More women began to star as the action-lead in many action/adventure films, but they were also more likely to be hypersexualised in these roles (Heldman, 2016: p.4). The introduction of the action babe in the 1970s has become a prominent role in male dominated genres that suggests that there is more of an acceptance of women as action heroes. Female action heroes such as Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* (Scott, 1979), Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984), Barb Wire (Pamela Anderson) in *Barb Wire* (Hogan, 1996) and Jordan O'Neill (Demi Moore) in *G.I. Jane* (Scott, 1997) are all considered 'action babes'. Halle Berry as Catwoman demonstrates the limitations of the action babe as her body becomes the sight for objectification. Rather than her active violent confrontations being recognisable within the film's plot, it is the focus on her body that becomes the subject of spectatorship (Heldman, 2016: p.7). In *Catwoman* and *Batman Returns*, Catwoman (Berry/Pfeiffer) shifts from being a meek, spineless protagonist subject to a fighting, sexualised protagonist object, and only discovers a sense of sexual confidence as a result of the attempt(s) made on her life (Heldman, 2016: p.7).

Although Pfeiffer's S&M styled cat-suit can be seen as 'problematic', Berry's Catwoman presented an outfit that left little to the imagination. The primary focus of the film is Berry's body surrounded by her black leather outfit, dominatrix whip and impractical stiletto heels when

jumping from rooftop to rooftop and engaging in violent confrontations (Heldman, 2016: p.7). This version of Catwoman can be seen as empowering to some audiences. When she is portrayed as Patience, the high-angle and close-up shots often focus on the confined, small spaces she inhabits, in addition to the unimportance and vulnerability of her character. As Catwoman, she breaks out of her confines from the use of low-angle long-shots, representing her as a powerful superheroine who refuses monogamous relationships. For example, when Patience is conversing with her employer, the use of high-angled shots of her boss, and the low-angled close-up shots of her character demonstrate his authority over her and her insignificance to him. As Catwoman, the rooftop scenes often present Patience as the one in control. Catwoman as a character problematizes the role of female protagonists in action/adventure and superhero narratives by only being seen as a sexually desired object when behaving in violent ways. The action/adventure and superhero genre is typically seen as a male space designed for male audiences, and whilst it is one of the privileged spaces for the display of the male body, the sexualisation of female bodies is generally different. The superheroine is either hyper-sexualised, which becomes the focus of the narrative, or the superheroine is masculinised (Tasker, 1993: p.77; p.149). For Catwoman, she cannot do anything without having a sex appeal (Taber, 2014: p.146).



(Fig.12 [Left] Office scene, *Catwoman* [2004]). Still of Halle Berry (Catwoman/Patience Phillips), Sharon Stone (Laurel Hedare) and Lambert Wilson (George Hedare).

(Fig.13 [Right] Rooftop scene, *Catwoman* [2004]). Still of Halle Berry (Catwoman).  
Source: Google images.



The female-led superhero narrative has proved to be risky for Hollywood studios, particularly Warner Bros. and Disney to produce and distribute when considering the box office flops of female-led narratives from the early-2000s. *Catwoman* was an industrial risk, and an overall box office and critical failure, as was *Elektra* (Bowman, 2005), released just a year later. The profits made by these films ranged from non-existent to negligible in comparison to the male-led narratives of this same period, such as *Spider-Man* (Table 1, Table 3).<sup>13</sup> The box office data and critical reviews regarding *The Dark Knight Rises* and *Batman Returns*, suggests that the popularity of Catwoman in film properties lie with the association of Batman.<sup>14</sup> *Catwoman* acknowledged Catwoman as an independent female-lead, nevertheless, it is difficult not to associate the box office failure of *Catwoman* with the over-sexualisation of Berry's character, along with the absence of any female-led superhero narratives in contemporary cinema, until the announcement of *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017). The box office flops of comic-book adaptations *Catwoman*, *Elektra*, and *Aeon Flux* made female-led comic-book adaptations risky for Hollywood studios which... 'is directly linked to protagonist hypersexualization' (Heldman, 2016: p.8). Although female-led superhero narratives have largely been absent from contemporary cinema, the increased involvement of strong superheroines/anti-heroines/villainesses have recently become more prominent. Superhero narratives often portray female characters as the male superheroes' co-star or support role. Female-led superhero narratives are slowly increasing. Women accounted for fifty-two percent of *Wonder Woman's* audience. Considering the superhero genre typically draws an audience that is sixty percent male, the increasing interest in the superhero genre can be associated to the portrayal of women in superhero narratives (McClintock, 2017).

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<sup>13</sup> The box office figures have come from the website: [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com) and have been adjusted to inflation. Films released between 2016 and 2017 have not been adjusted to inflation due to them being recent releases.

<sup>14</sup> *Catwoman* was meant to be a spin-off from *Batman Returns*, but it took twelve years to get made.



**TABLE 3**

Film Title	Domestic Gross	Lifetime Theatres	Opening Day	Opening Gross	Worldwide Gross	Opening Theatres
<i>Catwoman</i> (2004)	\$51,079,155	3,117	\$7,741,240	\$21,254,292	\$104,315,223	3,117
<i>Elektra</i> (2005)	\$29,997,461	3,204	\$5,471,685	\$15,735,996	\$69,656,798	3,204
<i>Suicide Squad</i> (2016)	\$325,100,054	4,255	\$64,893,248	\$133,682,248	\$745,600,054	4,255
<i>Wonder Woman</i> (2017)	\$412,497,440	4,165	\$38,247,254	\$103,251,471	\$821,497,440	4,165

The over-sexualisation of female characters is also noticeable through the portrayal of Quinn and the development of her costume over time. In addition, the intertextual relationship between original material and the adapted properties is recognisable through Quinn. Unlike most female characters emerging from comic-book narratives into different media, such as film and television shows, Quinn first made an appearance in *Batman: The Animated Series* in the episode “Joker’s Favor” (1992). In what was meant to be a minor role in an episode, Quinn featured in nine episodes of the animated series and in a one-shot comic-book title *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*. Quinn’s first appearance was enough to inspire fans’ fervor, and she quickly became a fan favorite, particularly among female viewers (Taylor, 2015: p.82). She soon established herself in *Batman* titled comic-books, and later in her own self-titled comic-book after she proved to be a popular and likeable stand-alone character and accomplice/supposed love-interest to the Joker. Arguably, Quinn’s initial association to the Joker made the character a popular personality in the animated series, and later in her first live-action debut in *Suicide Squad* (Ayer, 2016).

In *Batman: The Animated Series*, Quinn’s identity and original/most recognisable costume resembled a traditional harlequin jester costume. This costume concealed Quinn’s identity and body for most of her time operating as Quinn. Dr. Harleen Quinzel voluntarily adopts the Quinn persona and costume as a means to become free, in order to remove the confined associations of professionalism and sanity. Voluntarily choosing her costume is in itself - a radical break with ‘tradition’, when considering a superhero’s/villain’s origin (Roddy, 2011: section 3.11). Her

costuming is an act of cross-dressing that violates the more risky barrier between sane and insane. This origin story, in addition to many Quinn fan-fictions portray her transformation as a liberation as opposed to a psychological breakdown (Roddy, 2011: section 3.15, 3.3).

(Fig.14 Harley Quinn in *Batman: The Animated Series* [1992-1995]).  
Source: Google images.



With minor changes added by artists for the *Batman* (and Batman-related) comic-book titles, the full-body costume became her most identifiable costume in the comic-book and animated television world. Quinn is a frequent choice for cosplayers of all ages, due to both her exuberant personality and traditionally *unrevealing* costume (Taylor, 2015: p.82).<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the original costume only sexualised the character by accentuating specific body parts, depending on the artists' interpretation. The look of DC's comic-book characters often changes alongside a comic-book reboot. In comparison to her earlier origins and similar to some of Joker's origins, Quinn's insanity and bleached skin was the product of being thrown into a vat of acid by the Joker, as opposed to the application of white make-up and voluntarily becoming her alter-ego. Quinn's outfit included black and red tight shorts, boots and a tight-fitting sleeveless top, in addition to half of her hair dyed red and the other half dyed black, mimicking the jester full-body costume from previous interpretations. DC's Rebirth in 2016 provided Quinn with a similar costume to the New

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<sup>15</sup> Cosplay is a popular art in which participants wear costumes to portray a particular character, and is commonly associated to ComicCon events etc. More recently, it has transferred into a much wider market.

52 outfit, however, the original blonde hair colour of Harleen Quinzel/Quinn was re-introduced with blue dip-dye on the left side of her hair and pink dip-dye on the right. Quinn's appearance in the animated television series to the comic-book interpretations has exaggerated her figure and provided her with a more revealing costume. Furthermore, Quinn's costume in *Suicide Squad* also accentuates the female anatomy and was met with mixed reviews regarding the authenticity of her costume to previous interpretations. Although her hair-style is similar to that of the Rebirth comic-book titles, the edgy outfit adopted by Margot Robbie reinvented the character's signature look and restyled her into more of a modern femme fatale than a female Joker (Truffaut-Wong, 2016). David Ayer (*Suicide Squad's* director) may have chosen to completely change Quinn's look as a way of evolving her and distinguishing her from Bruce Timm's (*Batman: The Animated Series* co-creator) original interpretation. As Quinn has grown as her own character in multiple-platforms since her role in the animated series, her signature outfit has morphed into less of a traditional look to more of a sexual and bright interpretation, both of which is evident in terms of her identity (Truffaut-Wong, 2016).



(Fig. 15 [Left] Harley Quinn in *Harley Quinn* #1 [2013]). Source: <http://www.dccomics.com/comics/harley-quinn-2013/harley-quinn-1>.



(Fig.16 [Right] Harley Quinn in *Harley Quinn* #1 [2016]). Source: <http://www.dccomics.com/comics/harley-quinn-2016/harley-quinn-1>.

The choice of costume was due to the realism of the DC Extended Universe. Co-creator Paul Dini of the animated series stated that despite the love for the traditional harlequin look, the outfit would not have worked in a more realistic *Suicide Squad* setting (Holmes, 2016). Costume designer Kate Hawley states that Robbie was originally meant to sport the jester outfit, but the plans were scrapped by Ayer (although it does make an appearance). Hawley explains that the inspiration for the design for the final costume was found in the likes of Courtney Love and Debbie Harry, and how that ultimately assisted Robbie into deciding on the multi-coloured hair and baseball-bat-enthused design (Shepherd, 2016). Quinn's costume change may have been a product of distinguishing herself from the abusive undertones subjected to her by the Joker. Although *Suicide Squad* does feature the Joker, the scenes which he shares with Quinn are not as violent in comparison the animated series and comic-book properties, and her costume diminishes any abusive connotations to the character. This will be discussed in greater detail later; however, it is important to consider that the improvements on their relationship are reflected in the costumes they both wear.



(Fig.17 Promotional poster for *Suicide Squad* [2016]). Still of Margot Robbie (Harley Quinn).  
Source:  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1386697/media/viewer/rm4050653440>.

To an extent, Quinn sexualises herself in the same way Catwoman does. As opposed to a superheroine like Wonder Woman, villainesses and anti-heroines adopt a femme fatale-like personality and seem to be portrayed in a more sexualised/alluring way. It is this categorisation

that it is somewhat more 'acceptable' than if it was to happen to a superheroine or prominent secondary female character. Furthermore, the impact of Ayer/Robbie's interpretation, most notably Quinn's costume, in addition to the culture surrounding it, normalises the sexual implications associated with the character. As mentioned, Quinn's personality and traditional costume has attracted cosplayers of all ages. It is Quinn's costume in the live-action adaptation, and the most-recent comic-book narrative(s) that has also attracted cosplay participants. Many cosplay enthusiasts like to take on the challenge of role-playing different characters according to current trends (Rahman, 2012: p.332). Corresponding with the success of superhero films, cosplay is transitioning from a niche market to a widely-enjoyed activity, as is evidenced by Ayer/Robbie's Quinn costume being the most popular Halloween costume of 2016 in both the United States, and the United Kingdom (Kyriazis, 2016). Even a year before its release, Robbie's Quinn outfit was the most searched for Halloween 2015 (Shepherd, 2016). In comparison to her previous costumes, it is evident that Quinn's cinematic costume is easy to acquire specifically due to its simplicity and similarity to 'normal clothes'. The 'softening' of Quinn's current costume has provided audiences and fans alike with a pragmatic portrayal of her involvement in *Suicide Squad*, in addition to the chance to sexualise themselves, either as part of a small-scale or wider market.

The discussion of hyper-sexualisation and exaggeration of the female anatomy typically derives from Laura Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' theory in which women in media (primarily narrative film) are looked at and displayed (Mulvey, 1999: p.837).<sup>16</sup> Using Wonder Woman, Catwoman and Harley Quinn as examples, it is evident that Mulvey's theory is represented through the depiction of these characters in comic-book, film and television narratives, noticeably through the ways in which the

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<sup>16</sup> Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' theory was built on the theories formulated by Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, where Freud drew much inspiration from mythologies.

characters are drawn/depicted and the costumes they wear. They are displayed as erotic objects for the characters within the narrative, and as erotic objects for the spectators/audience (Mulvey, 1999: p.838). As briefly mentioned, and specifically focusing on the *Marvel Swimsuit Specials*, which ran parallel with the high-point of over-sexualisation of female superheroes during the late-1990s/early-2000s, male superheroes are also sexualised and objectified in certain superhero narratives, although less so than women. Plenty of scenes from *Thor* and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony Russo/Joe Russo, 2014) depict tight-clothing and the focus of the male protagonists' torso's and biceps. While these examples can be interpreted as sexualisation of the male form, they are frequently used as a means to highlight a superhero's physical strength rather than for sexual desire (Davis, 2014).

Similarly, Nightwing's posture and posterior are exaggerated in many comic-book panels, with comments often made by fellow superheroes/supervillains. For example, in *Nightwing* Vol 2 #138, villainess Super Moth compliments Nightwing on how appealing his posterior looks in his tight-fitting costume. Although his costume is not as revealing as many other superheroines' costumes, the ways in which he is drawn compares to the ways in which the female form is presented/posed. Social media sites, such as Tumblr and Reddit have dedicated websites/posts in appreciation of Nightwing's exaggerated/sexualised features.<sup>17</sup> The sexualisation of Nightwing in comic-book properties, and *Thor* and *Captain America* in blockbuster-films can be associated to Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' theory. While Mulvey's theory states that only women are displayed as erotic objects, it is evident that certain male superheroes can be sexualised by the audience/readers/artists in addition to the characters within the narrative. Since Mulvey's theory

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<sup>17</sup> Tumblr appreciation blog-post for Nightwing's posterior:  
<https://nightwingstonedass.tumblr.com/>.

surfaced, Neale has aimed to discuss the representation of masculinity within narrative film. Neale deduces that the gaze of mainstream cinema in the Hollywood tradition is not only male, but also heterosexual. The look of the audience is indirect and influenced by the looks of other characters in the film, and that these looks are not marked by desire, but by fear, hatred or aggression (Neale, 1983: p.14). Neale states that the male body cannot be marked as an erotic object in Hollywood cinema due to repressed homosexual voyeurism (Neale, 1983: p.8). Therefore, this 'tradition' reinforces that heterosexual masculinity is the social norm in narrative film. In conclusion, Neale demonstrates that the male body can actively be the spectacle (displayed), but the viewer is rejected a look of direct access, and that there is no evidence of cultural convention which displays the male form explicitly as the object of the erotic gaze (Neale, 1983: p.14). Neale's theory is plausible when considering the objectification of the male (superheroes) body and the viewer/readers denial of direct access. For example, as previously mentioned, it is often through supporting characters' gazes that superheroes like Nightwing, Thor and Captain America actively become the spectacle. Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in the display and sexualisation of the male body in film and other media. In addition, the insights proposed by academics, such as Yvonne Tasker's work on gender and the action genre, as well as the increase of scholarly work dedicated to queer theory in film, has also contributed to the discussion of the sexualisation of men in film and other media. The expansion of female readers/audiences and female creative teams behind superhero narratives suggest that certain male superheroes are somewhat sexualised. Referring back to Nightwing and his creative teams, there have been some suggestions that the character may be gay or bisexual (Charles, 2015). The deliberate sexualised poses were to interest homosexual men and women in the *Nightwing* comic-book and therefore, maximise profits. The over-sexualisation of superheroines is more prominent than their male counterparts, however, whether directly or indirectly, the concept of male sexualisation does exist.

(Fig.18 Nightwing in *Nightwing* #138 [2008]). Source: Google images.



### Super-powerless? Rape and abuse against female characters and superheroines

Women and superheroines in superhero narratives are also subjected to being victims of sexual assault, rape and mental and physical abuse. Domestic abuse is the most common trait in superhero narratives, notably the relationship between Joker and Quinn. In addition, abuse between partners, such as a male superhero and a non-superhero secondary character is also frequent. Often, these instances are retconned, or are simply ignored and 'resolved' with the focus being around the superhero's feelings as opposed to the victims.<sup>18</sup> For example, in *Spectacular Spider-Man* #226 (July, 1995), Peter accidentally strikes Mary-Jane halfway across the room mid-fight with one of his clones. Although he instantly feels remorse, he runs away leaving Mary-Jane crying and blaming herself for what has just occurred. In comparison to Peter, Mary-Jane does not possess any super-powers, and so his strength affects her more than if he were a regular human-being. Mary-Jane's entire passage recounts how Peter must feel given what he has been through in the previous few months. She creates an emergency device, calling for him to come home and self-justifies Peter's behaviour/actions while blaming herself for the whole ordeal (Myers, 2015). This incident outlines a recurring theme of victim-blaming in superhero narratives, often linked to cases of domestic/physical abuse, sexual assault and rape, with the victim being held responsible for the incident.

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<sup>18</sup> Retconned/retcon refers to 'retroactive continuity' where new information challenges established facts in fictional work, therefore, ignoring, adjusting or replacing old interpretations.



Narratives such as Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic hitting his wife Sue Storm/The Invisible Woman and Hank Pym/Ant-Man striking his wife Janet van Dyne/The Wasp are justified, or their existence is retconned, especially as they identify as superheroines themselves. Reed first slapped Sue in *Fantastic Four* #222 (September, 1980), however, the more prominently-drawn strike was within *Fantastic Four* #281 (August, 1985). *The Mary Sue* in particular reflected on these events when examining the abuse against women in comic-books (Myers, 2015). For some, the strike is justified as Sue had transformed into villainess Malice, The Mistress of Hate, and therefore, it broke her free of evil and negative emotions towards the rest of the team. Although the superheroine-turned-villainess trope is problematic in itself, it has presented a customary theme within superhero narratives. In *Avengers: Disassembled* (2004-2005) after Scarlet Witch loses her children, she is presented as the antagonist of the narrative. Her mental state in addition to the Wasp's comments about abortion leads her to ask Doctor Doom for help to meddle in black magic to restore her children back to life (Smith & Goodrum, 2011: p.494).



(Fig. 19 Reed Richards hits Sue Storm in *Fantastic Four* #281 [1985]). Source: Google images.

Early-1980's comic-book narratives also depicted Hank Pym striking his wife. This is after she discovered a planned attack on his team-mates (Avengers), in order to regain his credibility after his temporary suspension. This particular event has become a distinctive association to Hank Pym's Ant-Man, indicating that he is a 'wife-beater'. Since its publication (*Avengers* #213 [November, 1981]), the 'wife-beater' connotation has resurfaced over the years, eventually leading to Jim Shooter (writer of the *Avenger's* storyline) explaining the real intention of the event. 'Hank is supposed to have accidentally struck Jan while throwing his hands up in despair and frustration – making a sort of “get away from me” gesture while not looking at her' (Shooter, 2011). Shooter justifies this incident as the artists' misinterpretation of his original request for the panel, and the limited time-frame in order to redraw it. However, despite the hate mail and negative reviews associated with the incident, *Avenger's* sales went up by 10,000 copies per issue and found that people cared about what occurred between Hank and Janet (Shooter, 2011)<sup>19</sup>. Although these women possess superhero powers and can defend themselves in such altercations, it is these situations that are often forgotten about because the primary concern revolves around the male superhero who acts rather than the female body which is acted upon.

Unlike the previous examples, Quinn's and Joker's relationship distinguishes a continuous abusive relationship. It is their relationship for which Quinn is most known, particularly due to her origin story emerging from one of Joker's plans. Tosha Taylor argues that the morbid cycle of unrequited love and physical abuse becomes a representation of the cyclical nature of gendered power struggles in which emotional and physical abuse are rooted in a desire for *and* rejection of

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<sup>19</sup> Average Total Paid Circulation for *Avenger's* comic-book titles as reported by Comichron, specifically looking at the early 1980s: <http://www.comichron.com/titlespotlights/avengers.html>.

the gendered subject (Taylor, 2015: p.83). While it is known that Quinn’s infatuation with the Joker is not reciprocated, and it is his obsession with Batman that is why he exists, he relies on Quinn as a means through which he accomplishes his criminal work and appraises his own demonstrations of power – often through physical abuse (Taylor, 2015: p.84). In the episode “Mad Love” from the animated series *The New Batman Adventures* (1997-1999), Quinn revisits her origin story and recognises Batman as the cause of the Joker’s anger and an interruption in their ‘romantic’ relationship. She attempts to kill Batman and calls the Joker to observe her accomplishment, only to receive a back-handed slap before being pushed out of a window by him. Quinn states that “It’s my fault, I didn’t get the joke” (*The New Batman Adventures*). Ultimately, she ends up falling back in love with him after he sends her a flower and note that reads “Feel better soon – J”. The Joker cannot function as Gotham’s most fearsome villain if he gives in to his unexpected desire for a romantic partnership with Quinn, yet he needs her to return to him to reassert his villainous power (Taylor, 2015: p.86-87). The physical and mental abuse that Quinn suffers from the Joker has provided a significant feature to her character. However, the abuse portrayed in the comic-books and animated series makes sure that it avoids idealising their morbid relationship, particularly through Quinn’s relationship with Poison Ivy and the subtle comments that address the dysfunction (Moran, 2016). Similar to the previous examples, Quinn’s character often reinforces victim-blaming, and thus the significant concern of the narrative reverts back to the male’s (Joker’s) actions. Nevertheless, Quinn’s and Joker’s relationship is also distinctly different, as contrary to previous examples, their relationship rests on the unrelenting abuse the Joker forces on Quinn.



(Fig. 20 Harley Quinn is pushed out of a window by Joker scene, *The New Batman Adventures* [1997-1999]). Source: Google images.

Quinn's representation as a victim of abuse illustrates how the character is similar to those affected by abuse in real-life situations. Many women stay with their abusive partner due to love addiction and/or they employ self-blame, both of which are characteristics of Quinn (Herbert, 1991: p.312). Although Quinn's story remains mostly faithful to her original origin story in many adaptations, some have differed, thereby exaggerating or suppressing the level of abuse. The New 52 origin story removes Quinn's desire to become Joker's sidekick and becomes a story about Quinn existing as a consequence of the Joker's actions, victimising Quinn even more (Moran, 2016). Quinn is perceived as long-suffering, and she must suffer the Joker's psychologically and physically abusive behaviour in order for him to assume dominance. As a result, Quinn relates to those that accept the abuse as her fault and ultimately forgives him (Taylor, 2015: p.87). The self-responsibility and continuous return to the Joker presents Quinn as a dependable character, and translates a realistic interpretation of domestic abuse. Quinn's solo-series and her involvement in the *Suicide Squad* comic-book allows Quinn to independently explore outside the Joker's control. Quinn's character development moves away from the association to the Joker, both as a villainous accomplice and a punching bag (Moran, 2016).

In *Suicide Squad*, Quinn is presented as more of an anti-heroine despite the Joker's involvement in the film. Furthermore, the fluidity of Quinn's independence and dependence on the Joker is presented, often displaying the character as ambiguous. Similar to "Mad Love", Harleen Quinzel falls in love with the Joker and voluntarily becomes Harley Quinn, however, she continuously proves her worth to him before he finally accepts her decision. She demonstrates her utter devotion to the Joker by willingly jumping into a vat of chemicals; however, her agency is only capable of allowing her to freely choose actions already undertaken by men (Moran, 2016). Her participation in the *Suicide Squad* demonstrates Quinn can be an individual, however, the reoccurring flashbacks to her origin story and relationship with the Joker presents a contradictory

characteristic of Quinn. These scenes often highlight the Joker's psychological manipulation of Quinn instead of physical abuse. Although it is not explicitly stated, the reason for the suppressed amount of physical abuse that typically exists between Quinn and the Joker could be due to *Suicide Squad's* film rating. Ayer has stated that the film's rating was always going to be a PG-13 since its inception, therefore the amount of abuse existing between the two characters was likely related to the appropriate rating (Weintraub, 2016). Another significant explanation is to represent one of *Suicide Squad's* leading characters as a character with agency whilst also keeping Quinn's and the Joker's unhealthy power dynamic intact (Cuen, 2016). After Joker's escape from Arkham Asylum, which Quinn helped organise, Joker's henchmen capture and strap down Harley Quinn before hurting her "really, really bad", following an electric shock to the head (*Suicide Squad*, 2016). Although this can be implied as one of the only scenes where Joker physically hurts Quinn, her response: "I can take it", implies there is some level of consent on her part, and continues to prove her love for him in later scenes (*Suicide Squad*, 2016; Moran, 2016). The mixed reviews regarding the cinematic release proposed a number of alternate cuts, deleted scenes and studio interference regarding the dark theme of the final cut, ultimately leading to many re-shoots (Evening Times, 2016).

(Fig. 21 Joker prepares to shock Harley Quinn scene, *Suicide Squad* [2016]). Still of Margot Robbie (Harley Quinn). Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1386697/mediaviewer/rm501548288>.



A list regarding the allegedly missing/deleted/altered scenes has been released via *Reddit*, and within these deleted scenes themes of physical abuse exists between the two characters.<sup>20</sup> 'Joker sweet-talks Harley into lowering the gun, charming her, then backhands her across the face. Afterwards he sweet-talks her again and they kiss' (Chipman, 2016). This is one of several scenes that was removed in order to portray their relationship as more loving than abusive. Moreover, after the Joker rescues Quinn in a hijacked helicopter, he reportedly pushes her, *before* the helicopter is shot down, in order to kill her. The revised edit was arranged so that the helicopter is shot down first, and then the Joker pushes Quinn out in order to save her (Chipman, 2016). Joker's sole motivation in *Suicide Squad* is to rescue Quinn from the assembled team. Paired with the removed scenes of physical abuse, their romanticised relationship has caused disagreements regarding the legitimacy of their authentic relationship. By depicting Joker's abuse as love, their unhealthy relationship is more palatable for mainstream audiences (Moran, 2016). The female leads in the *Twilight* saga (2008-2012) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* saga (2015-) are often represented as ignorant without the dominant male protagonist. These films also reduce the sexual and violent overtones typically found in their original formats (Goodman, 2015). *Suicide Squad* has been criticised for glamorising Quinn's relationship with the Joker, further indicating that physical abuse is more tolerable than harmful. Mainstream audiences who are not familiar with the original text, may recognise this rendition as authentic, without understanding the implications of their traditionally abusive, back-and-forth relationship. If the ugliness of their relationship were portrayed, it may have opened up a larger discussion about domestic abuse.

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<sup>20</sup> The list regarding the removed/altered scenes was posted on *Reddit*: [https://www.reddit.com/r/DC\\_Cinematic/comments/4wayvi/apparently\\_a\\_complete\\_list\\_of\\_the\\_deleted\\_scenes/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DC_Cinematic/comments/4wayvi/apparently_a_complete_list_of_the_deleted_scenes/).

The theme of rape in superhero narratives and other media is typically considered as a taboo subject. The number of reported rapes has increased since the 1970s/1980s, and by the end of the 1990s, rape cases were taken more seriously by the public and by the authorities (Schubart, 2007: p.22; Phillips, 2016: p.7-8). A culture of compliance in Hollywood has surfaced over time, in which cases of sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape regarding male studio chiefs and filmmakers against employees and actresses have been overlooked. Recently, Harvey Weinstein (film producer/former co-owner of The Weinstein Company) has been accused of multiple sexual harassment and sexual assault allegations (The Associated Press, 2017; Kelly, 2017). The consideration of individual rape cases coincided with the evolution of the definition of rape, and therefore, the portrayal of rape in cinematic properties also changed over time.

Before the 1970s, women who were raped in films often became the victim, where the men, often the protagonist, avenged the victimisation (Schubart, 2007: p.27). As women began to feature as the main protagonist in male-dominated genres in the 1970s, the introduction of rape-revenge films portrayed women as vigilantes who retaliated on their own accord. Here, rape did not discipline a woman, but instead, transformed her into an avenger (Schubart, 2007: p.27, 84). Although this may be seen as empowering to some women at the time, feminist scholars have pointed to the excessive depictions of rape in television, film and books as an indication of rape culture (Phillips, 2016: p.10). In filmic terms, rape is used as a plot device in order to portray women as equally as powerful to men or superior to them. Rape is often used to create an interesting backstory for a female character, which ultimately motivates and shapes them as powerful individuals or complex characters. Strong female characters are broken down by rape and sexualised violence in order to survive and emerge stronger, which essentially disrupts masculinity and challenges patriarchy, therefore, strengthening the female position and *weakening* the male position (Hudson, 2015; Phillips, 2016: p.76; Schubart, 2007: p.86).



When applying this to superhero narratives, the portrayals of rape against women in comic-books typically depict the effect it has on the male protagonist as opposed to the trauma experienced by the female victim (Garland, 2016: p.53). For example, in DC's mini-series *Identity Crisis*, after her death, it was revealed that the Elongated Man/Ralph Dibny's wife, Sue Dibny had been raped by villain Doctor Light. Her murder prompted a flash-back to take place, where readers witness the rape of Sue. It is the shock value of this revelation that affects the narrative and the reader, as opposed to the emotional state that a character, like Sue, experiences after the crime has been committed. The brutalisation of women is nothing more than a plot twist in many superhero narratives (Garland, 2016: p.54). Complex emotional trauma is not handled particularly well in the superhero genre, as many superhero narratives are resolved through action and violence.



(Fig.22 Doctor Light rapes Sue Dibny in *Identity Crisis* [2004]).  
Source: Google images.

There have been narratives that contradict this, notably the comic-book series *Alias* (2001-2004) featuring Jessica Jones, which became the basis for the *Jessica Jones* (2015-) television series. While the television series has been adapted to address the subject of rape, specifically, the trauma



and survival of it, the comic-book incorporates themes of sexual control, trauma and psychological manipulation/abuse. Marvel's MAX imprint (and their own rating system following their break from the Comics Code Authority) enabled Marvel to explore controversial and troubling subjects such as rape, sexual assault and abuse. Although explicit content has featured in superhero narratives in the past, whether it was through the establishment of imprints or otherwise, the *Alias* storyline has been one of the very few narratives which has depicted the trauma and realism of sexual control. While Jones' back-story is both a standard tale of rape and abuse, it is the survival of what happened to her with her sanity more or less intact that is heroism in itself, and the heroism of ordinary people as well as that of superheroes (Kaveney, 2007: p.72-73). In the comic-book, Jones' trauma is explained in her discussion with Luke Cage where she admits that Killgrave 'had her' for eight months. Killgrave did not rape Jones, but humiliated her in every other sexual way possible: she had to bathe him, she had to watch while he raped random pick-ups he had compelled to make love to him and to each other and 'on a rainy night, with nothing to do, he'd make me beg for it' – Jones became his whipping girl for every defeat he had at the hands and fists of male superheroes (Kaveney, 2007: p.93). While under Killgrave's 'mind-control', Jones encountered psychological control, whether it was the abuse of her super-powers, or through the theme of sexual control.



(Fig.23 Jessica explains her trauma to Luke in *Alias* [2001-2004]).  
Source: Google images.

The television show presents Jones' (Krysten Ritter) trauma through psychological manipulation and Kilgrave (David Tennant) raping her. The audience do not witness the act itself, but the revelation of it comes after Jones confronts Kilgrave: "Not only did you physically rape me, but you violated every cell in my body and every thought in my goddamn head" (*Jessica Jones*, A.K.A WWJD?). Rape is a foundational part of the text, and its presence is constant. Even if it is invisible, it is always there (Opam, 2015). Jones' recognisable suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder is a result of the months of psychological control/abuse and rape that Kilgrave has forced upon her. Kilgrave is interested in Jones because of her superhero powers where he mentally manipulates Jones as an object of strength, and under his control, she is forced to use them on anyone he chooses and is forced to love him (Thury, 2016: p.4). Kilgrave's ability to control Jessica's mind and therefore her actions is comparable to the actions between an abuser and their victim. In the comic-books, Killgrave is portrayed as a lacklustre villain, whereas, in the television show, he is depicted as a true predator, a terrifying villain whose power is evoked in every episode through the ways in which he manipulates his victims, even when he is not present (Thury, 2016: p.4). Although Jones is physically strong, it does not affect Kilgrave's ability to control her.



(Fig.24 Jessica confronts Kilgrave scene, *Jessica Jones* [2015-]). Still of Krysten Ritter (Jessica) and David Tennant (Kilgrave). Source: Netflix.

Jones realises the extent of his control after she leaves him, although a part of her was subconsciously aware of his control over her during the time that he 'had her'. 'Jones's self-annihilation is a direct response to the horrifying revelation that she remembers everything

perfectly – and how she felt while it was happening’ (Loofbourow, 2015). Kilgrave’s compelling behaviour mimics that of a rapist or an abusive partner and therefore, relates to the real-life victims of rape and abuse. In this version, Kilgrave is a product of child abuse, and acquires mind-controlling powers from the experiments his parents conducted on him. The audience later find out that he does not know how to live life without compelling people to do certain things for him, and by taking away their ability to consent, he is unsure what is right or wrong (Opam, 2015). This is comparable to the language in which rapists and abusers use when they do not realise they have committed a crime, often leading to the victim blaming themselves rather than the offender. These criminals try to deflect and redirect blame, denying or failing to recognise their own power and responsibility (Zutter, 2015). This is also conveyed after Jones refuses to report the return of Kilgrave to the police. Although he has raped and sexually abused her and other victims, Jones does not intend on reporting the crimes to the police. Not only does this highlight the lack of faith in the system, it also highlights the control of their abuser and the possible consequence that the victim will be blamed for the crimes that have been committed. This version of Kilgrave as a product of child abuse meant that it was possible to feel sympathy for him (in comparison to his comic-book interpretation), however, given the physical and mental abuse he has directed towards others, this is not considered as a justified excuse for his actions (Virtue, 2015). This does not stop Jones and other victims from getting justice, nor does it excuse Kilgrave’s actions and behaviour towards them.

The discussion and confrontation of rape is presented in *Jessica Jones*, with the focus on the survival of the act. Executive producer and showrunner Melissa Rosenberg stated “‘We are looking at the aftermath of what happened to her from *her* viewpoint”’ (Ryan, 2015). *Jessica Jones* moves away from the typical use of rape (plot device/shock value) and represents the fallout in a realistic way. The portrayal of rape in film and television has expanded and progressed alongside

the waves of feminism. While third-wave feminists may disagree on many topics, the victimization of women when expressing themselves, or experiencing some sort of sexual assault or rape is usually agreed on. Audiences have witnessed the act in multiple texts prior to *Jessica Jones*, therefore, focusing on the aftermath of rape and/or sexual assault can indicate the development of the portrayal in film and television properties. The television series is an exploration of control over women as much as it is an exploration of rape and the aftermath.

The assaults on male superheroes are not portrayed as 'rape', and are generally minimised and used as a subplot to explain the birth of a child (Garland, 2016: p.59). In *Batman and Son* #655-658, Batman was drugged and raped by Talia al Ghul to conceive and raise a child in secrecy to create the perfect heir to Ra's al Ghul's Empire. The concept of victim blaming and dismissal of rape exist in male superhero narratives. Superheroes are typically represented as strong beings, and so, they cannot feature as a victim of rape/sexual assault because if they really did not want the rape to happen, then they would have stopped it (Garland, 2016: p.62). Nightwing has been presented as a character of sexualisation and as a victim of two rapes. In *Nightwing* #93 (2004) and *New Titans* Vol 1 #88 (1992) both offenders are women. The former is more familiar when referring to the portrayal of rape in superhero narratives and both narratives disregard the incident as rape and fail to portray the effect it had on Nightwing. In *New Titans*, Mirage rapes Nightwing after shape-shifting into his girlfriend Starfire. After Nightwing discovers this and discusses the incident with his girlfriend, Starfire blames Nightwing for not recognising her impersonator, implying that he had cheated on her. In addition, Mirage displays no regret over the incident, while another teammate labels Nightwing a "slut" (*New Titans* #88). Comic-book portrayals of rape and sexual assault reveal negative cultural stereotypes and reinforce victim blaming in many of their narratives (Garland, 2016: p.62). The more recognisable event focuses on Nightwings guilt over killing villain Blockbuster, as opposed to the act of rape. An injured Nightwing is confronted and raped by

protégé Tarantula, despite the physical and mental pain he experiences. Writer Devin Grayson stated that the panel did not depict rape, and that it was non-consensual sex, before retracting the statement in 2014 (Burtis, 2004; Terror, 2014). These examples indicate that the theme of victim-blaming affects male superheroes as much as it affects superheroines. The dismissal of male rape in superhero narratives reinforces society's 'strong masculine practices', in which a common male stereotype depicts men as being able to protect themselves and thus unable to be a victim of rape.



(Fig. 25 [Left] Nightwing is called a "slut" after he is raped in *New Titans* #88 [1992]). Source: Google images.

(Fig. 26 [Right] Tarantula rapes Nightwing in *Nightwing* #93 [2004]). Source: Google images.



### **Suited-down: De-powerment of female characters and superheroines**

Previously mentioned, secondary characters like Gwen Stacy are usually effected by the theme of de-powerment. As Simone outlines in *Women in Refrigerators*, the treatment of women range from de-powerment, to rape, to death, all depending on the character. Unless it directly involves a primary (typically male superhero) character, then it is unlikely that a secondary character like Gwen Stacy will be revived or her narrative be retconned. One of the few exceptions where a superheroine/female character is resurrected, is the death and resurrection of Wonder Woman in *Wonder Woman* #125-126 in 1997. Similarly, X-Men superheroines Phoenix/Jean Grey and Storm/Ororo Munroe have experienced de-powerment and turned evil, with Phoenix 'dying' numerous times.

Barbara Gordon/Batgirl experienced de-powerment and physical abuse in the critically-acclaimed graphic novel *The Killing Joke*. Used as a means to affect her father's (Commissioner James 'Jim' Gordon) sanity and Batman's morality, the Joker shoots Gordon in the stomach, paralyzing her from the waist-down, and takes indecent pictures of her afterwards. 'During the assault, he removed her clothes and photographed her naked body in a brutal display of sexualized violence' (Phillips, 2016: p.130). Similar to the use of rape in superhero narratives, Gordon's paralysis had little to do with the overall plot, and was used as a plot device/shock value for the male protagonists/antagonists narratives and for the readers. Although Gordon retired as Batgirl in the one-shot comic-book *Batgirl Special* #1 (1988), prior to *The Killing Joke*, the Joker's abuse against Gordon restricts the character from returning as Batgirl in future superhero narratives.





(Fig. 27 Gordon is shot by Joker in *The Killing Joke* [1988]). Source: Google images.

Instead of offering a miracle cure for her paralysis or returning to a time before *The Killing Joke* incident, comic-book writers Kim Yale and John Ostrander began writing superhero narratives that depicted Gordon living with a physical disability (Sirkin, 2015).<sup>21</sup> From 1989-2011, Gordon was introduced as computer expert Oracle, with her first appearance in *Suicide Squad* #23 in 1989.<sup>22</sup> Gordon is wheelchair-bound when appearing as Oracle, yet is featured as the lead role in the *Birds of Prey* series. She became an information broker for superhero teams Suicide Squad and Birds of Prey (and was a member of both) and for members of the Bat-family. The first two volumes of the *Birds of Prey* title (1999-2009, 2010-2011) signified Gordon as an independent disabled superheroine character. While the New 52 and the Rebirth titles altered many DC characters continuities, the paralysis of Gordon and her role as Oracle remained the same. The re-introduction of Gordon as Batgirl in her self-titled series was written by Simone from 2011-2012, and 2012-

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<sup>21</sup> After Gordon’s retirement as Batgirl in *Batgirl Special* #1 prior to the events of *The Killing Joke*, the character’s fate in DC’s universe was uncertain.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon’s identity as Oracle was not revealed until *Suicide Squad* #38 in 1990.

2014.<sup>23</sup> Simone's run on the series tied up any loose-ends between Gordon as Oracle and as Batgirl, with the first issue explaining how she is able-bodied again.

Following DC's Rebirth reboot, Gordon returned as a titular character in the renamed *Batgirl and the Birds of Prey* comic-book. However, in 2015, a variant cover for *Batgirl* #41 featured the Joker alongside Batgirl, holding a gun across her shoulder, with a red smile drawn on her face and the Joker pointing to her cheeks in a gun-like fashion. Despite the cover being one of the twenty-five Joker-themed variant covers, which celebrated the villain's seventy-fifth anniversary, the cover was criticised by fans for highlighting a dark part of her history. The cover's artist Rafael Albuquerque took inspiration from *The Killing Joke*, and while fans were predominantly upset with the offensive tone of the *Batgirl* cover, given that the current narrative was a lot lighter, youthful and optimistic, many fans were also upset with the implication of rape culture (Ching, 2015; Wyatt, 2015). Along with the demeaning pictures taken of Gordon, there is the implication that she was also sexually assaulted/raped by the Joker (Ching, 2015). Albuquerque requested DC to not publish the cover after fans responded negatively, circulating the hashtag #changethecover on Twitter and Tumblr (Wyatt, 2015).

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<sup>23</sup> Gail Simone was informed by one of DC's editors that she would no longer be writing the *Batgirl* series. Controversy among fans on social media supposedly led to Simone returning as *Batgirl*'s writer: <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2012/12/09/gail-simone-fired-from-batgirl>; <http://www.denofgeek.com/us/books-comics/38150/gail-simone-back-as-batgirl-writer>.





(Fig. 28 Variant cover for *Batgirl: Interference* #41 [2015]). Source: Google images.

Gordon has been explored in detail since *The Killing Joke*, both as Oracle and again as Batgirl. The cover depicted Gordon begging the audience for help and therefore, removed this courageous portrayal and re-established Gordon as a victim of trauma. Diminishing Gordon as Oracle/Batgirl reduced her to a victim of abuse (and hinted sexual assault/rape) and de-powers her as a superheroine. The *Batgirl* comic-books explored the after-effects of PTSD/trauma-related symptoms and Gordon's inability to escape the events of *The Killing Joke*. Even though Gordon is used to motivate and affect the male protagonists in *The Killing Joke*, the succeeding Oracle/Batgirl narratives portray her trauma and survival in a favourable way. The response and criticism from the comic-book/fan community regarding the variant cover highlights there is a changing perspective concerning the treatment of female characters and superheroines, and that the treatment of such characters is improving and progressing.

Superheroines/female characters are more likely to be over-sexualised and treated poorly than male superheroes, however male objectification does still occur. The development of feminism and evolution of culture over time has led to an improved treatment and representation

of women in superhero narratives. While there is the perception that comic-book fan-bases are male-dominated, the female demographic is expanding. For example, the female audience for the *Wonder Woman* film accounted for fifty-two percent of its audience. Considering the superhero genre typically draws an audience that is sixty percent male, the increasing interest in the superhero genre can be associated to the portrayal of women in superhero narratives (McClintock, 2017). The representation of women in film, specifically within the action/adventure and superhero genre still lacks female protagonists, however, the amount of female protagonists has slightly increased since 2015 (Behrens, 2017). *Wonder Woman* became the most profitable superhero film of 2017, surpassing *Spiderman: Homecoming* (Watts, 2017), *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi, 2017) and *Guardians of the Galaxy: Vol. 2* (Gunn, 2017), while *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Johnson, 2017) became the most profitable film of 2017 overall, suggesting that female-led narratives can be as profitable as male-led (superhero or action/adventure) narratives (Drum, 2018; D'Alessandro, 2018).

## DIVERSITY

The main focus of this sub-section is the representation of diverse superheroes, specifically black superheroes and disabled/impaired superheroes in a variety of media. Similar to the discussions of the 'tricky' portrayal of female characters/superheroines in superhero narratives, the scarcer representations of black superheroes have struggled with problematic depictions within the medium. Since the medium's beginning, black characters have often featured as:

Either brute savages or minstrel-show stereotypes with huge white eyes and white-rimmed lips, often speaking an imbecilic hybrid of pidgin English and exaggerated African American slang. Above all, they were stupid (Wright, 2001: p.37).

In addition to the several stereotypes society has created and demonstrated within comic-books and other media, black characters are frequently relegated to secondary characters or sidekicks to the white male protagonist. While black superheroes have been and still are underrepresented in comic-books and their adapted texts, there has been even less of a representation regarding disabled/impaired superheroes. When people with disabilities are portrayed in the media, they often feature in documentaries or factual television programmes, and are regularly represented in a negative and/or stereotypical way. Disabled people are typically portrayed as weak and unattractive, with impairment routinely employed as a metaphor for sin or wickedness (Barnes, 2011: p.189). For example, Quasimodo (Tom Hulce) from Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale/Wise, 1996) and the many adaptations that came before it (based on Victor Hugo's 1831 novel of the same name) presents the hunched-back bell-ringer as a monster who is feared by the townspeople. Within the comic-book medium and its adapted texts, only a small number of notable/apex superheroes are disabled/impaired, and while there have been attempts to appeal

to a particular demographic, therefore providing audiences/readers with a diverse range of superheroes, many of these attempts have been quite controversial. This sub-section will explore the historical context regarding the stereotypical depictions of both black and disabled/impaired superheroes, and how the industry has moved away from these over time. The portrayal of diverse superheroes in their adapted properties will also be considered and compared to their primary texts, in addition to the diversity within the comic-book industry.

### **Racial stereotypes in comic-book history**

As mentioned, historically, the depiction of black superheroes/characters has been controversial in a wide-range of media, especially in comic-books. The early portrayals of black characters were often racial stereotypes that performed as a secondary character or sidekick to the white male protagonist/superhero. Many representations of black superheroes/characters were created by a predominantly white-male industry, which was influenced by Blackface minstrelsy and other 'cultural trends' of the time (van Dyk, 2006: p.468). During the 'Golden Age', characters such as Ebony White, Washington (Whitewash) Jones and Steamboat appeared as sidekicks to their white superiors. Rob Lendrum states that Whitewash was nothing more than a minstrel stereotype in a zoot suit who supplied comic relief, where his role as a hero was often diminished by becoming a target of abduction and his roles as a substitute damsel-in-distress (Lendrum, 2005: p.365). These characters are frequently criticised not only for their role in comic-book narratives, but also their appearance. While these racially stereotyped characters existed in comic-book narratives and were based on Blackface minstrelsy in various media, it was not until the post-war Civil Rights Movement agitation that led to the reduction of offensive stereotypes in comic-books (Heer, 2014: p.255; Goodrum, 2016: p.49). These narratives attempted to portray black characters as heroes, yet the way they were drawn created a contradictory statement. They were either drawn as a caricature of a black person, as in the case of both Ebony White and Whitewash Jones, or they attempted to

'whitewash' black characters from looking like an authentic African-American character in later narratives, as demonstrated by Whitewash Jones in *Young Allies Comics 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special #1* (2009) (Cronin, 2016; 2013). The 1960s Civil Rights Movement efforts to quash Blackface minstrelsy performances and representations in film, comic-books and other media resulted in the comic-book industry's removal of many stereotypical black characters, where far fewer non-white characters existed than before (Heer, 2014: p.256).

### **Twack, take that stereotypes!: Black Panther, Afrofuturism and non-conformist interpretations**

Following the absence of black characters in comic-book narratives, the first black superhero was introduced by Marvel in 1966. The Black Panther was first introduced in *Fantastic Four* #52 as the ethical, incorruptible, super-scientist and superb warrior king of the fictional African nation of Wakanda (Nama, 2009: p.138). Black Panther made appearances and featured alongside superhero teams *Fantastic Four* and *The Avengers* over the years and established himself as the most prominent black superhero. Following Black Panther's successful guest appearances, he began appearing in *Jungle Action* in 1972 before becoming the titular character from 1973 until 1976.<sup>1</sup> Before the Black Panther became the comic-book's protagonist, *Jungle Action* experienced declining sales, yet the remodelled series was one of the most political story-arcs of the 1970s and was hailed by critics and fans alike (van Dyk, 2006: p.474-476). Despite this, the overall sales for *Jungle Action* were low and the title was cancelled. Marvel relaunched the Black Panther to feature in a self-titled series in 1977 with Jack Kirby (co-creator of Black Panther) as writer. In comparison to *Jungle Action*, Kirby focused on the science-fiction elements of Black Panther and his fictional African homeland. Michael van Dyk has criticised Kirby's reinvention as he focuses on unimaginable plots, rather than accurate black portrayals, therefore eliminating any notions of black experience

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<sup>1</sup> The title changed to *Jungle Action Featuring the Black Panther* in September 1973.

(van Dyk, 2006: p.479-480). However, these narratives did not portray any depictions of racist African stereotypes, although it is arguable that it does reduce any African-American associations to Black Panther's character and setting. The Black Panther character and comic-book series is innovative by melding science-fiction iconography with African imagery, and challenges previous iterations regarding the historical and symbolic constructions of Africans as simple tribal people and Africa as primitive (Nama, 2009: p.137).



(Fig. 29 Introduction of Black Panther in *Fantastic Four* #52 [1966]). Source: [http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Fantastic\\_Four\\_Vol\\_1\\_52](http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Fantastic_Four_Vol_1_52).

Considering science-fiction is a major theme within the superhero genre, it is not unusual for elements of science-fiction to feature within the *Black Panther* comic-book. Adilifu Nama argues that T'Challa (Black Panther) is directly drawn from the political movement yet is presented in an Afrofuturist sensibility, which ultimately makes the superhero such a compelling character (Nama, 2009: p.136).<sup>2</sup> While some people may refer to Black Panther's name as a direct association to the radical Black Nationalist organisation (Black Panther Party), which emerged shortly after the character's creation, it is the notions of colonialism and other racially relevant issues that makes

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<sup>2</sup> Afrofuturist or Afrofuturism refers to the futuristic or science-fiction themes in literature, music, media, etc with elements of black history and culture.

the Black Panther a politically relevant character. Marvel's first black superhero was coincidental to the founding of the black militant group, but both clearly chose the name as it evoked the image of black pride (Wright, 2001: p.219).

As will be discussed with other black superheroes/characters, the association of racial stereotypes is linked to blaxploitation of the early to mid-1970s.<sup>3</sup> The science-fiction influences embedded throughout Kirby's run, such as the sale of precious metal (vibranium) that T'Challa brought great affluence to his homeland, transforms the once backward Wakanda into a cultural amalgamation of super-science and tribal tradition (van Dyk, 2006: p.468-469). Despite the cancellation of Kirby's run on *Black Panther* in 1979, with the remaining contents being published in *Marvel Premiere*, the placement of Black Panther in the science-fiction setting of Wakanda is politically progressive, given that the history of black representation has relied on clichéd notions of black figures tied to the geography of the black ghetto as their exclusive domain (Nama, 2009: p.138-139). Since the beginning of his own series and participation in superhero teams across comic-books, Black Panther has already established himself and his third-world setting as unique, and not constricted to the stereotypical assumptions regarding black superheroes/characters. Similarly, it could be argued that the science-fiction elements in the *Black Panther* comic-book led to the improved representation of black characters within the science-fiction genre.

Generally, black characters are absent from science-fiction cinema, yet their exclusion does not eliminate blackness as a source of anxiety (Nama, 2008: p.11). The correlation between blackness and the 'Other' in science-fiction cinema is not unfamiliar. Blackness and sexuality has

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<sup>3</sup> Tommy L. Lott states that blaxploitation was a relatively short-lived phenomenon which has been used to refer to the black-oriented films produced in Hollywood c. 1970-1975 (Lott, 1997: p.85).

often been used as a threatening or 'alien' metaphor in science-fiction cinema. In comparison to cinema, television appeared more progressive when addressing race and culture. *Star Trek* (National Broadcasting Company, 1966-1969) had become one of the first and most notable television series which included a multiracial cast. However, black racial representation in American science-fiction cinema has over time, and particularly in the 1990s, demonstrated a shift away from blackness as 'otherness' and/or simple tokenism represented in previous texts (Nama, 2008: p.38-39). Comic-book titles and television series like *Black Panther* and *Star Trek* can be seen as innovative when considering past depictions of black superheroes/characters. Nevertheless, the science-fiction themes embedded throughout such texts could be seen as not 'being black enough' for target audiences.

Black representation in film and television became increasingly obsessed with addressing issues of black authenticity that primarily focused on black urban and underclass representations, which... ruled out imaginary and speculative constructions of blackness associated with the type of futurescapes found in SF film (Nama, 2008: p.161).

Christopher Priest followed Kirby's run on the *Black Panther* comic-book (*Black Panther* Vol 3) which included a more recognisable and commonplace New York City setting.<sup>4</sup> It is common for many of Marvel's superheroes to operate in New York, so it is not unexpected for a new helmed series to occupy the same space as other superheroes, especially if the series features guest appearances. While there were science-fiction similarities between Priest's version of the Black Panther and his comic-book predecessor, Priest used a New York background to ground the Black

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<sup>4</sup> Excluding a couple of *Black Panther* mini-series, the mainstream *Black Panther* comic-book was untouched for ten years.



Panther in a contemporary urban setting, similar to Marvel's other black superheroes, Luke Cage and the Falcon (Nama, 2011: p.48). This move can be seen as an industrial decision regarding the readership. By initially creating Black Panther as African, there is an acknowledged 'difference' between what the character and story will entail and the intended audience. Black Panther references American racial injustice and other relevant issues and markers of black history, heritage and culture, yet, making him African enabled Marvel to draw on the exoticization of non-American black people (Glee, 2014: p.233; Narcisse, 2016). By placing Black Panther in an urban African-American New York setting, he becomes a more relatable character to a wider audience, and an attempt to increase sales (something which Marvel was struggling to do) (Smith, 2018).

In comparison to Priest, who tried to make T'Challa a racially transcendent figure, *Black Panther* Vol 4 writer Reginald Hudlin made Black Panther a racially aware figure, who worked to emphasise the "black" in Black Panther (Nama, 2011: p.51). Yet again, T'Challa operated in New York after accepting an invitation from Matt Murdock (Daredevil) to become Hell's Kitchen's protector, before returning to Wakanda after Shuri's death.<sup>5</sup> T'Challa returned as the Black Panther in *Black Panther* Vol 6, written by Ta-Nahisi Coates which became the best-selling issue in April 2016.<sup>6</sup> In the same month, the release of *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony/Joe Russo, 2016) debuted and starred Chadwick Boseman as T'Challa/Black Panther. Black Panther's debut in the Marvel Cinematic Universe was well-received by fans and critics alike (Ellwood, 2016). It was

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<sup>5</sup> In *Black Panther* Vol 5, T'Challa's half-sister Shuri becomes the Black Panther in Wakanda and T'Challa becomes the titular character in *Daredevil* (later renamed *Black Panther: The Man Without Fear*).

<sup>6</sup> Comichron Website Sales Figures for *Black Panther* in April 2016 featuring the comic-book at #1, the same month *Captain America: Civil War* is released:  
<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2016/2016-04.html>.

announced that a self-titled *Black Panther* film will be released in February 2018.<sup>7</sup> Marvel has released its most up to date synopsis, stating:

After the events of *Captain America: Civil War*, King T'Challa returns home to the reclusive, technologically advanced African nation of Wakanda to serve as his country's new leader. However, T'Challa soon finds that he is challenged for the throne from factions within his own country. When two foes conspire to destroy Wakanda, the hero known as Black Panther must team up with CIA agent Everett K. Ross and members of the Dora Milaje, Wakandan special forces, to prevent Wakanda from being dragged into a world war (Artimage, 2017).

Assessing Marvel's statement, and considering the various publications/narratives of *Black Panther*, it seems the film has taken inspiration from the *Jungle Action* comic-book, with elements from Priest's run in regards to the internal conflict that threatens Black Panther/T'Challa's rule in Wakanda. Meanwhile, considering the inter-connected universe Marvel has created for its film and television properties, the film will most likely involve a collaborative threat outside of Wakanda. The scientifically-advanced influences Kirby embedded throughout his run and Priests' connection to the New York setting (and therefore, other superheroes) is significant within the film's context as it provides an explanation for outside enemies and allies motivations and purposes within the film.

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<sup>7</sup> Marvel and actor Wesley Snipes attempted to make a *Black Panther* film during the mid-1990s (Parker, 2018).



(Fig. 30 Tunnel chase scene, *Captain America: Civil War* [2016]). Still of Chadwick Boseman (T'Challa/Black Panther). Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3498820/mediaviewer/rm1647776256>.

### **Hero for Hire to Good Samaritan: Luke Cage, blaxploitation and black progress**

Following the emergence of Marvel's first black superhero, and using the growing prominence of black actors/actresses in film and television as their impetus, Marvel introduced readers to *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #1 in 1972 (van Dyk, 2006: p.470). Cage was the first black superhero with a self-titled comic-book, however, like many other black superheroes and characters that were established in media during this time, his portrayals were problematic. Cage emerged during the blaxploitation era that flooded media in the early to mid-1970s. While studios such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (*Shaft* [Parks, 1971]) and Warner Bros. (*Super Fly* [Parks Jr, 1973]) capitalised on the notion that black audiences would want to see more black actors/actresses on-screen, the depictions of these characters were often controversial. In comparison to the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, white writers scripted, and sometimes continue to script black superheroes/characters in comic-books and films almost exclusively (Lendrum, 2005: p.364). Comparing this to the underrepresentation of gender diversity within the comic-book industry, there is a distinct underrepresentation of racial diversity among creative teams. While this is improving, the lack of diverse talent within the comic-book industry still exists, and thus resonates with diverse readership/audiences (Phillips, 2016: p.121).

(Fig. 31 Introduction of Luke Cage in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #1 [1972]). Source: [http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Hero\\_for\\_Hire\\_Vol\\_1\\_1](http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Hero_for_Hire_Vol_1_1).



The box office successes of *Shaft*, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Van Peebles, 1971) and *Super Fly* influenced the comic-book industry into using blaxploitation as a means to interest African-American/black readers. The blaxploitation-inspired superheroes were mostly stereotypical black male brutes who focused on street crime in inner-city ghettos (Brown, 2014: p.136). The black male brutes Jeffrey A. Brown mentions are a contemporary reimagining of the 'black buck' stereotype which dominated many of the early cinema representations of black characters, most notably D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915). The black body of many superheroes is borrowed from the brutal buck stereotype and the superpowers that they possess are often exaggerated attributes of the brutal buck or savage (Lendrum, 2005: p.370). The black body has been stereotyped as sexually aggressive towards white women, and consequently sexually threatening to white men. The buck stereotype depicts black men being oversexed, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh (Bogle, 1997: p.21). The fear of the black seed evolves into the fetishism of the black male penis, thus reinforcing the fear of black masculinity. Cage embodied the black male brute stereotype and was a direct response of the blaxploitation phase, which was an attempt to attract African-American/black readers. Similar to, although not an exact replica of

John Shaft (*Shaft*), Cage is an oversexed detective-type character, who began a career as a 'hero for hire'.

In comparison to a superhero like Captain America, Cage does not conform to the typical requirements of a superhero (the costume, mask and secret identity); instead he is a "working stiff with powers", who requests payment as a result of his superhero activities (Kaveney, 2007: p.84). Carl Lucas' (Cage) background consisted of gang-related crimes, before deciding he wanted to make an honest man of himself. A friend of Lucas' plants heroin in his flat after being convinced that Lucas was responsible for his break-up with an ex-girlfriend, resulting in Lucas serving a wrongful prison sentence. In prison, Lucas becomes a victim of a racist corrections officer, and a volunteer for an experiment which results into superhuman strength and unbreakable skin, connecting with a history of medical experimentation on African-Americans in the American penal system. With his newfound power, Lucas breaks out of prison and, under a new alias as Luke Cage, operates in New York using his new powers for payment.

Although Cage and his comic-book was employed as a means to increase readership, his character and his portrayal, particularly in the *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* series conforms to the black male brute stereotype (van Dyk, 2006: p.473). The black male body has been related with the virtues of masculinity, yet, it has also been associated via racial and class prejudices with the insensitive, the unintelligent, and the animalistic (Brown, 1999: p.30). In comparison to Black Panther/T'Challa, Luke Cage was represented as rather unintelligent, and was more restricted when operating in early comic-book narratives. Furthermore, his steel-hard skin that can repel bullets and his superhuman strength can be seen as an additional factor that conforms to the

savage, fetishized, uncontrollable body of the buck stereotype which dominated many black superheroes/characters during the 1970s (Lendrum, 2005: p.366-367).

Cage requires payment for his heroic actions, which is distinctly contradictory to the moral code that is present in many, if not all white male superhero narratives. The writers of black superheroes, such as Luke Cage, attempt to bestow them with values and a code of morality that is distinctly *black*. White creators often conceived and wrote the Luke Cage series, with the exception of African-American artist Billy Graham assisting with the illustration and occasionally the scripts (Lendrum, 2005: p.367; Wright, 2001: p.247). Considering the racial hierarchy when comparing Luke to both black and white superheroes/characters, it is evident that he symbolises the black working/lower-class. The emergence of the new black middle-class coincided with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement during the early-1960s. By portraying Cage in this fashion, not only does it distinguish his character to other black and white superheroes, it also provides readers with different interpretations of 'blackness'. It also reiterates the financial problems of the black male community, notably the working/lower class (Lendrum, 2005: p.365). This is reflected in the *Luke Cage* television series in which Luke (Mike Colter) cannot pay his monthly rent despite working two jobs. In the first episode, the economic strains Luke Cage experiences are presented yet, unlike his comic-book predecessor, he denies any payment to become his landlord's bodyguards: "I'm not for hire, but you have my word ma'am" (*Luke Cage*, Moment of Truth). This was most likely changed to remove any negative stereotypes previously associated with the character, and instead justifies Cage's existence as a black superhero who behaves unselfishly, devoting his cause to Harlem and its residents (Knowles, 2016).

The *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* title was changed to *Luke Cage, Power Man* (#17) due to sluggish sales. The *Power Man* series modified Cage's character as a more conventional superhero (Wright, 2001: p.247-249). However, the change of title did not spark interest in readers and in an effort to save the character and series from cancellation, Marvel combined Luke Cage and Iron Fist, a white character inspired by the kung-fu craze of the late-1960s (who was also experiencing low sales). From 1978 to 1986, the series was known as *Power Man and Iron Fist*, though Iron Fist had joined the comic-book earlier. Luke Cage's comic-books were never among Marvel's best-selling titles, yet Marvel's initial effort at a leading African-American superhero still lasted into the late-1980s (Wright, 2001: p.249). In addition, the partnership with Iron Fist, although primarily an industrial decision, demonstrates Cage's progression into the inter-connected universe Marvel has provided for other superheroes. In *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*, Luke Cage is restricted in his operations, has little contact with other Marvel superheroes and battles with average villains. Cage's nemeses were often either crazed henchmen or members of an organised crime syndicate set on controlling the illicit underground economies of the local community (Nama, 2011: p.58). While this is represented in the television series, the stereotypes of such villains in the comic-book are downplayed. Furthermore, the villains follow the traditional formula of the Marvel/Netflix series by making them more realistic and believable. The *Power Man and Iron Fist* series included more diverse and devious villains (Nama, 2011: p.58). Lasting eight years, the death of Iron Fist marked the conclusion of the series, and Cage often featured as a guest appearance in other superhero narratives.

Luke Cage made a brief comeback in *Cage* (1992-1993), in which his signature canary yellow shirt was replaced with a tight, drab red T-shirt worn under a black jacket (Nama, 2011: p.62). Unlike other superheroes, Cage's costume did not alter much over the previous years of publication. Instead, black characters like Luke Cage, Black Goliath and Black Lightning (DC) each

wore costumes that attempted to reflect the fashion of the time in order to fit in with the black community (Lendrum, 2005: p.368). Lasting only twenty issues, *Cage* (2002) was situated within Marvel's MAX imprint. Nama states that this incarnation of Luke Cage was a poorly executed attempt to capture a hip-hop sensibility, and was similar to more gangster street expressions that have come to dominate hip-hop as entertainment and cultural statement in terms of form and content (Nama, 2011: p.62). While Nama acknowledges this interpretation as part of a more adult-readership, it also conforms to the stereotype of 'gangster' blackness. Luke Cage stands out as Marvel's most problematic and stereotyped black character (van Dyk, 2006: p.473). However, since the early-2000s, Cage has become a progressive and more inclusive character in comparison to his short-term series and one-shot cameos he so often previously featured in. His relationship with Jessica Jones, his participation in the Avengers and more notably, his leadership in the first two volumes of *New Avengers* (2005-2012) transformed his character to work more prominently with other established/apex superheroes.

Cage's appearance in other superhero narratives within the comic-book genre, in addition to video games and animated television series has helped his character's sustainability. While his portrayal in earlier narratives has been problematic, his recent depictions in both the television series and within comic-book narratives has seen Cage grow from a generic, stereotypical character, to one of the most fully fleshed out superheroes in the Marvel universe (Kollar, 2015). The live-adaptation television series in particular, has projected his character to become a well-known and popular superhero. He is introduced as a supporting character in *Jessica Jones* and features in seven episodes before he relocates to Harlem to start his life over. While he is introduced as a supporting character, an issue predominantly associated with ethnic minorities and women in the medium, the structure enabled a tighter inter-connected universe, and assembled the plot for the following instalment, *Luke Cage*.



Immediately, *Luke Cage* incorporates cultural references throughout the series, namely the occasional nods to soul and hip-hop motifs as Cage battles with the disadvantages of being a poor black man in New York (Child, 2016). Corrupt politicians, organised crime and the lack of faith in law enforcement are presented with conflicting perspectives throughout. Police detective Misty Knight (Simone Missick) clashes with vigilante Luke about the best way to handle justice, and Luke's reluctance to work with the police is not helped due to his criminal record (Dockterman). Considering the racial, political and social unrest that African-Americans/black people are currently experiencing in the United States, specifically regarding the violence and racial inequality towards black people, it is unsurprising to see *Luke Cage* address certain themes that may resonate with its audience. Mike Colter revealed that the hoodie he wears, and often gets destroyed by bullet-holes, was inspired by the hoodies worn by shooting victims Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, the former initially encouraging the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement (Nededog, 2016). In one scene, Luke is on the run as a falsely accused murderer of a police officer and is shot at by a criminal in an attempt to stop a store robbery. His false reputation as a criminal is discussed on a radio station via bystander Method Man (Clifford Smith), and 'holey hoodies' are sold as a sign of unity and support for Luke. Method Man raps a freestyle, whilst scenes of black men in bullet-holed hoodies walk the streets, staring down police officers and honouring their hero (Cage) as a representation of black resilience (Milner, 2016). The portrayal of Harlem's close-knit community and the themes of socio-political unrest regarding gun violence and police brutality against black individuals symbolises the realistic racial tensions currently in America.



(Fig. 32 Hallway fight scene, *Luke Cage* [2016-]). Still of Mike Colter (Luke). Source: Netflix.

Police brutality and harassment represent a prominent theme within the television series. Claire Temple (Rosario Dawson) is interrogated by Knight in order to understand why Cage is connected to all of Harlem's crimes and murders that have been occurring. Knight assaults Temple after she states that Cage is innocent (*Luke Cage*, *Blowin' Up the Spot*). Similarly, the police force harass young men and teenagers on Harlem's streets about Cage's whereabouts, and interrogate a teenager over his relationship with Cage and where to find him. The teenager emerges from the interrogation room with a bloodied nose and covered in bruises (*Luke Cage*, *Take It Personal*). The latter instance in particular uses police brutality to create a dividing opinion about Cage as a 'criminal' or as a 'hero' to Harlem and its community, and therefore, a dividing opinion about the reliance in law enforcement. Interestingly, both officers that question and assault Temple and the teenager are black, which A.C. Fowler argues as a means not to blame white Americans/police, but to portray the brutality against black bodies whether the offender is black or white (Fowler, 2016). In reality, the majority of news outlets frequently report on police brutality in regards to white officers injuring or killing young black men, as in the cases of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. In 2016, black males were killed at a higher rate than any other ethnicity (Swaine, 2017). The show makes an effort to illustrate that the Harlem community will protest officers that participate in brutality, including black officers. This illustration echoes the cases and protests of police brutality that involve both white and black officers; such as the protests after the death of Freddie Gray

(charges were filed by protesters against six police officers, half of whom were black) and Keith Lamont Scott (who was killed by a black officer) (Fowler, 2016).

Like many superheroes, Cage has encountered many individual interpretations and has successfully moved away from the direct racial stereotyping presented in his early publications. The television series in particular has combined different elements from Cages' historical publications and adapted them for contemporary audiences, whilst also highlighting current African-American/black struggles. Series creator, writer and executive producer, Cheo Hodari Coker incorporates the word "nigger" within the show because he firmly believes that it is the way that people speak in predominantly black communities, with Luke Cage preferring not to use it and using it only once (*Luke Cage, Code of the Streets*; Riesman, 2016).<sup>8</sup> The series depicts many themes, with police brutality and racial tension at the forefront, while other subtle themes, such as the use of soul and hip-hop songs signifying African-American/black culture in Harlem.

Coinciding with the release of the *Luke Cage* and *Iron Fist* (2017-) television series, *Power Man and Iron Fist Vol 3* was released 2016-2017. The television series was well-received by critics, and prompted Marvel to release a self-titled *Luke Cage* comic-book series in 2017 (Hughes, 2016). Cage has thus far become the most remarkable example of a black superhero who has risen to prominence within the superhero genre, however, he is joined by a growing number of other black characters that represent a challenge to the traditionally white dominated heroic landscape

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<sup>8</sup> The use of the word "nigger" is reminiscent of the Quentin Tarantino vs Spike Lee feud after the release of Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (Tarantino, 1997):

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/quentin-tarantino-accused-of-blaxploitation-by-spike-lee-again-8431183.html>.

(Brown, 2014: p.136). Marvel and DC have introduced few black superheroes since the beginning of the genre. Yet, some of these characters have achieved an equivalent level of success as the most well-known African/African-American superheroes Black Panther and Luke Cage. Among these are black superheroes Cyborg, Blade and Black Lightning. Others include War Machine, Falcon, (the re-imagined) Nick Fury, Cloak, Black Goliath, John Stewart, Steel and Miles Morales. However, these characters typically perform as secondary character/sidekicks in white, male-led narratives or as re-imaginings of traditionally white superheroes.

### **In the white man's shadow: black supporting characters and modified characters**

The Falcon (Sam Wilson) debuted three years after Black Panther's first appearance and appeared in *Captain America* #177. Initially, he appeared as a supporting character to Captain America within the series; however, the Falcon eventually become Captain America's full partner and shared billing with him (Wright, 2001: p.237). The titled was advertised as *Captain America and the Falcon* (1971-1978); however, Nama suggests that during this time, the Falcon had struggled with the equivalence (Nama, 2011: p.78). The Falcon appears in nearly every issue, assisting Captain America against villains in New York. He works as a Harlem social worker who endorses a liberal civil rights agenda and encourages young people to better their lives through education (Wright, 2001: p.237-238). The collaboration between Captain America and the Falcon advocated racial integration during the late-1960s/early-1970s, whereby both characters would discuss and tackle issues of racism and poverty amongst other subjects. Marvel had already introduced a monarch and a working/lower-class black superhero from the ghetto; therefore, the Falcon was originally introduced as a middle-class social worker (Wright, 2001: p.247). Teaming up with a white superhero and tackling social, racial and political issues that were so prominent during this time, enabled Marvel to appeal and interest the African-American/black audience. The Falcon's ability to fly via mechanical wings symbolised black social and economic upward mobility which coincided

with the emergence of the black middle-class (Nama, 2011: p.73). Before his removal from the *Captain America* comic-book in 1978, a new origin story was provided for the Falcon which depicted him as a criminal thug.

In *Captain America* Vol 1 #186 "Mind Cage" (1975), the Falcon was nicknamed "Snap" Wilson and his dealings as a criminal led to a partnership with the mob. This rendition suggested a troubling concern about successful blacks. Beneath their professional and successful exterior may be a corrupt alter-ego, a consequence of their black-ghetto environment (Nama, 2011: p.77). However, the social relevance of the topic corresponded with the establishment of the black middle-class, and the economic increase some blacks had experienced, moving from lower-class poverty to middle-class. The re-imagined shift in Wilson/Falcon's character helped reinforce the Falcon as inferior to Captain America, placing him more prominently as a sidekick, and complicated the stereotype of a 'good' African-American, ultimately reducing his appearances in other narratives (excluding his temporary participation in the Avengers between 1979 and 1980) throughout the 1980s/1990s (Goodrum, 2016: p.211-212).

Since then, the Falcon has once again become a supporting character in the *Captain America* comic-books and a permanent member of the Avengers. Sam even accepted the Captain America mantle after the de-powerment of Steve Rogers (starring as the titular character in *All-New Captain America*), and more recently, when Steve Rogers/Captain America defects to HYDRA. Within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Sam Wilson/Falcon (Anthony Mackie) is represented as a former United States Air Force pararescueman and first befriends Captain America in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. He works for the Department of Veterans Affairs for those affected with PTSD and connects with Captain America on a military level, given their military pasts. The

cinematic portrayal has not been tainted with a criminal background and his character is provided with a well-respected role of a military man, and an expertise in a number of skills. Since his cinematic debut, he has become an Avenger (*Avengers: Age of Ultron* [Whedon, 2015]) and a prominent character in Marvel's current and upcoming cinematic properties.

Similar to Falcon, War Machine/James "Rhodey" Rhodes is regarded as a sidekick/secondary character within comic-book and film narratives (Nama, 2011: p.81). In *Iron Man* Vol 1 #118 (1979), James Rhodes first appears as a character and occasionally appears as a supporting character throughout the series. In issue #144 (1981) Rhodes' origin story as to how he became Stark's personal pilot is explained in a flashback. Rhodes features as a recurring character in the *Iron Man* comic-books. After Tony Stark succumbs to his alcohol addiction in issue #170, Rhodes is prompted to don the Iron Man suit to defend Stark International against villain Magma. Until this point, Rhodes was just a glorified chauffeur, and it was not until Stark became too consumed by the demons of alcoholism and depression, that Rhodes became a major figure (Nama, 2011: p.79). Rhodes alternates between a supporting character and Iron Man, until Stark reveals a War Machine suit for Rhodes in issue #282. Rhodes officially becomes War Machine in issue #284. Nama mentions that Rhodes' agency was robbed by his impersonation of Stark (Iron Man) until the War Machine armour was created (Nama, 2011: p.79). Rhodes was able to experience some independence from the *Iron Man* comic-book and character with the launch of *War Machine* (lasting twenty-five issues [1994-1996]), featuring Rhodes/War Machine as the main protagonist. However, due to Stark's technological dictatorship over the armour, War Machine remained a derivative of Stark's super-science and therefore, was overpowered by his superhero persona (Nama, 2011: p.81). This is distinctly represented in the *Iron Man* films, as Rhodes (Terrence Howard/Don Cheadle) mimics his comic-book interpretation from supportive black friend/liaison of Iron Man's (Robert Downey Jr.) to superhero War Machine (*Iron Man/Iron Man 2*). While he is

a notable superhero and member of the Avengers, his personal missions are only discussed within Marvel's cinematic texts, and his superhero activities often align with Stark's.

A category of traditionally white characters have been transformed into black superheroes within comic-book narratives and other media. The first re-imagining of a traditionally white superhero, was John Stewart, introduced during the blaxploitation phase as a short-term replacement (*Green Arrow/Green Lantern* #87, 1971). Not only did he become the first black Green Lantern, but he was also DC's first black superhero. In order to stay socially relevant with their readers, and compete with Marvel's three prominent black superheroes, DC introduced John Stewart/Green Lantern and attempted to address diversity and racism in some superhero narratives. However, some of DC's narratives, with the intention of addressing socially relevant themes such as civil rights and racism, were problematic. Most notably was DC's *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* #106 "I am Curious (Black!)" (1970). In this narrative, Lois discovers that the black people of Metropolis' 'Little Africa' are so suspicious of white people that she has to transform herself into a black woman in order to get a news story. She realises what life is like as a black woman, from living in poverty to feeling alienated by white people. Lois befriends a black man who previously spoke badly about her, and helps stop a drug deal before he gets shot. After she donates blood, saves his life and transforms back into a white woman, he realises they are equals. The narrative is constructed as a 'white saviour' storyline and incorporates many problematic attitudes to civil rights and racism, including the subject of Lois' 'blackface' and challenging a black activist on the errors of his ways (Goodrum, 2016: p.156-157).

*Superman* also explored civil rights themes in issues #234 and #239 (1971). Illustrations such as a map of Krypton and the depiction of black Kryptonians in Vathlo Island (separate from

white Kryptonians) were presented to suggest that Krypton and its inhabitants were multi-cultural. Without realising it, DC effectively instituted the practice of segregation into Krypton (Goodrum, 2016: p.160). These narratives intended to address the subject of racism and civil rights in order to stay socially relevant with their readers, however, the narratives themselves were problematic. DC's attempts to contribute to the social relevance of civil rights and racism via their black characters did not achieve the same recognition as the leading *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* storylines. Ironically, it was a white Green Lantern (Hal Jordan) that tackled the social issues of the late-1960s/early-1970s such as racism and corruption. When the blaxploitation phase dissolved, John Stewart eventually became the Green Lantern (1984-1986) and became an important outpost for black representation and signified the beginning of DC's black superheroes (Nama, 2011: p.29).

The most recognised racially transformed superhero is Nick Fury. Traditionally a white superhero, Fury was a leader of a United States Army unit, and in 1965, became a James Bond-like Cold War spy and later, director of SHIELD. As part of the *Ultimate Marvel/Ultimate Comics* universe, Fury was transformed into a black character in a re-imagining of the Avengers called *The Ultimates* (2002-2004). The Ultimate Universe provided writers and artists the creative opportunity to re-imagine superheroes from the mainstream universe into a separate universe, whilst also providing Marvel (which had declining sales) a chance to interest new readers. Artist Bryan Hitch redesigned the character to look like Samuel L. Jackson and he first appeared in *The Ultimates* #1 in 2002. Jackson depicts Fury in numerous live-action properties, making the black comic-book Nick Fury one of the most interesting black superheroes, and marking the beginning of black superheroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Nama, 2009: p.141). The popular re-imagining of *The Ultimates* Fury and the depiction by Jackson led to Marvel replacing the white Fury altogether in comic-book narratives. The mini-series *Battle Scars* (2012) was created to introduce Nick Fury Jr., the black illegitimate son of the originally-white Fury (Sr.) to coincide with



Jackson's cinematic portrayal. The film properties ultimately fed back into the comic-books and Marvel's marketing decision to replace the original Nick Fury was to attract new readers/audiences of their cinematic properties. Depending on what version readers/audiences determine is 'authentic', the influence of the black re-imaginings of Nick Fury and John Stewart has proven that these characters can be as popular (if not more) than their white predecessors. However, the reinterpretations also emphasise the demand for original and modern black superheroes.

(Fig.33 Re-imagining of Nick Fury in *The Ultimates* [2002]). Source: Google images.



### **The industry without a wheelchair: Disabled superheroes and the super-crip stereotype**

Many children will play with dolls/action-figures that are one-armed, leg-less or damaged in some way, and are often disinterested with their 'differences'. In recent years, the manufacturing of disabled dolls/action-figures have been developed by British toymaker Makies. The company have created custom-made dolls/action-figures specifically for children with disabilities to help children with disabilities feel normal (Khoo, 2015). In comparison to the gradual expansion of ethnically diverse superheroes, the creative teams and non-white readers, disabled superheroes are even-less represented in superhero narratives and are rarely considered within scholarly work regarding their portrayals. Scholars such as Colin Barnes and Geoffrey Mercer have written about disability, but predominantly focused their attention on disability rights, legislation and the portrayal of

disability in media. Owing to the lack of academic writing, the representation of disabled people will be discussed and associated with disability portrayals in media.<sup>9</sup>

Portrayals of disability are significantly linked to disability in a historical context. Corresponding with and inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and second-wave feminism, the disability rights movement began during the 1960s in the United States. The American black civil rights struggles, with their combination of conventional lobbying tactics and mass political action, provided a major stimulus to an emerging 'disability rights movement' (Barnes, 2011: p.166). Similar to the structure of grass-roots organisations, the disability rights movement exercised mass mobilisation until legislation was passed. During the 1970s/1980s, both the general populace and academics had failed to recognise or accommodate the human diversity associated with impairments and disabilities (Barnes, 2011: p.29). In the United States, it was not until 1973, that the Rehabilitation Act was passed and emphasised equal opportunities for those with a disability.

The considerable media attention and heightened public awareness from organised disability rights demonstrations culminated with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (ADA). This law is generally considered the most comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation in the world and contributes as one of the oldest anti-discrimination laws in Western society (Barnes, 2011: p.167). In 1995, the Disability Discrimination Act was passed in the United Kingdom, which was prompted by mass demonstrations calling for equality for disabled people.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Other than Jose Alaniz who has recently written about disabled superheroes in *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (2014), the discussion regarding disabled superheroes is limited.

<sup>10</sup> This act was replaced by the Equality Act in 2010.

Regarding the short time-period in which disability law has existed, it is conceivable why disabled superheroes have been absent from superhero narratives in their original and adapted form. The inability to recognise disabilities/impairments as discrimination held by the general public would inevitably influence the comic-book industry's presumption that disabled characters may not necessarily appeal to comic-book readers, and when disabled characters were present within superhero narratives, they were often depicted as the villain.

More importantly, the representation of disabled people in media often emphasises the negative characteristics of disabilities. Generally, individuals with disabilities are absent from mainstream media or are inaccurately portrayed. Presence of disability is often within documentary film/television about a particular disability itself, and can be presented as a call for inspiration or an object of pity (Schwartz, 2010: p.841-842). Frequent portrayals of disability include the villain/anti-hero, a victim of violence (which led to their disability), and the 'super-crip'; characters who triumph over their tragedy and generally develop superhero powers or heightened abilities in the process (Barnes, 2011: p.194). As a consequence of their difference, disabled people are often referred to as the other. The 'otherness' of disabled people has been exploited as a source of entertainment and/or to incite the fears and emotions of the non-disabled population/audience (Barnes, 2011: p.188). By making the representations of disabled people monstrous or vulnerable, the audience reinforce the otherness/difference between the disabled and non-disabled. For example, Mole Man who first appeared in the *Fantastic Four* comic-book is both visually impaired and physically deformed, and is mocked for being physically different, therefore presenting him as an outcast.

In superhero narratives, disabled/impaired superheroes have existed for almost as long as the genre itself. Only a few have achieved the same recognition as able-bodied superheroes in comic-books and their adapted texts. The origin of disabled superheroes usually fall into two categories: either the superhero is born with the disability, or they acquire the disability and thus, super-powers through a traumatic event. Occasionally, some superheroes already possess super-powers/skillset before they acquire a disability later in life. Professor Charles Francis Xavier (Professor X) and Barbara Gordon (Oracle) both possess super-human abilities/skillsets before they are presented as disabled. The superhero origin, specifically the acquired super-powers through a traumatic event sees weakness as something that must be triumphed over (Berlatsky, 2014). The fate of the disabled superheroes' life is usually transformed by an accident, removing one ability, yet heightening another, therefore conforming to the super-crip stereotype. One of the first disabled/impaired superheroes was Doctor Mid-Nite who debuted in *All-American Comics* #25 in 1941. Doctor Mid-Nite is blinded by a grenade, yet discovers he can see in darkness. He creates a visor enabling him to see in the light and begins to fight-crime. He is considered to be one of the first impaired superheroes, preceding the debut of the most-notably blind superhero, Daredevil. The emergence of notable disabled/impaired superheroes followed the debut of Doctor Mid-Nite and other minor disabled superheroes during the early-1960s.

Professor X first appeared in *The X-Men* #1 in 1963 as creator and leader of the X-Men. Professor X has a telepathic ability, a genius-level intellect and can read and take over the minds of others. Since his debut, and in most of his interpretations, Professor X is paraplegic and uses a wheelchair. Although disabled, Professor X is a respected authority figure in society. He is valued, and people seem to overlook the fact that he is in a wheelchair (Kimble, 2015: p.4). The depiction of Professor X in the *X-Men* titles and adapted properties (by Patrick Stewart and James McAvoy) addresses the negative stereotypes of disability and demonstrates that disabled people should not

be pitied or rendered inept, and that they do have an important role in society (Kimble, 2015: p.5). The fact that Professor X is disabled and uses a chair is irrelevant to *The X-Men's* plot. Disability is routinely employed as a means for a character to triumph over their tragedy, which is accompanied by the development of superpowers and/or heightened abilities. Professor X's telepathic and mind-controlling abilities and genius-level intellect existed before he becomes physically disabled (how he becomes disabled is revealed in *The X-Men #20* in 1966), thus reinforcing that his disability does not define who he is. Brain power, whether in the form of superhero abilities or intelligence is the most important aspect of Professor X's character (Hawkins, 2014). The other most significant disabled/impaired superhero is Daredevil/Matt Murdock. Daredevil debuted in his self-titled comic-book, *Daredevil #1* in 1964. In this issue, Daredevil's origin and cause of blindness is explained whereby, as a teenager, he saves a blind man from an oncoming vehicle carrying a radioactive substance. Daredevil's traumatic origin story is reinforced and triumphed over due to the development of enhanced senses and abilities.



(Fig.34 Professor X in X-Men comic-book). Source: Google images.

Daredevil/Murdock upholds the law by becoming a lawyer by day and crime-fighting superhero by night. Like many disabled superheroes, Daredevil is a super-crip; he has the ability to 'see' by focusing on sound waves washing over his environment. *Daredevil* and his texts present a standard narrative in which blindness stands for heightened non-visual perception skills (Kuppers,

2006: p.91). Frank Miller's run during the 1980s reworked Daredevil's reasons for becoming a lawyer, introduced martial-arts inspired fighting to Daredevil's abilities and gradually transformed Daredevil into an anti-hero. Miller took the fading *Daredevil* comic-book and made it a title that excited people, introducing the blind vigilante lawyer's assassin ex-girlfriend Elektra, taking a gang-boss from *The Amazing Spider-Man* and making the Kingpin a satanic Godfather of New York's Hell's Kitchen (Kaveney, 2007: p.144). After briefly leaving the title, Miller returned, and with Denny O'Neil, introduced 'Catholic guilt' to Daredevil's identity. Miller's run on the *Daredevil* comic-book inspired both the *Daredevil* (Johnson, 2003) film and television series.

The *Daredevil* film received mostly negative critical reviews, especially when compared to other successful early-2000 superhero adaptations (Table 1). However, *Daredevil* and the popular portrayal of Professor X (Stewart) in the *X-Men* film familiarised another super-crip character to the silver screen and mainstream audiences. The film, like the comic-book, visualises and emphasises how a disabled character like Daredevil (Ben Affleck) can 'see' and therefore operate as a vigilante superhero. The opening credits illustrate a gesture to blindness by depicting the names of the cast and the creative teams into a Braille dot arrangement, emerging out of Hell's Kitchen's cityscape to dissolve into 'basic' English lettering (Kuppers, 2006: p.93). While you cannot touch the lettering, the feature reinforces the theme of blindness. Daredevil is able to see/read the world by a form of sonar or echo: he reads the sound waves coming to him as they travel over objects in Hell's Kitchen, outlining them for him (Kuppers, 2006: p.93). The film's visuals perform to translate an interpretation of blindness and sight from Daredevil's perspective. In addition to the portrayal of his radar sense, the emphasis on loud sounds alert us to Daredevil's sensory world (Kuppers, 2006: p.94). This is first presented once Murdock emerges from a hospital bed after the accident occurs, where the character and the audience both experience the heightened sounds of the city. However, in comparison to the television series, the use of Murdock/Daredevil's radar

sense in the film is overused. It is this ability that almost becomes his signature super-power, as opposed to portraying the significance of his more realistic and heightened senses.

Depending on the creative team, the comic-book alters the portrayal of Daredevil's radar sense and other abilities. Yet, one ability that often stands out and is frequently used in the comic-books and adapted texts is his ability to 'see' through his sense of hearing and through the outline/silhouette of objects and people that Murdock/Daredevil encounters. The *Daredevil* television series tones down Daredevil/Murdock's (Charlie Cox) use of radar vision and focuses more on the remaining four, enhanced abilities. More emphasis is put on Murdock/Daredevil's ability to hear the surrounding sounds of Hell's Kitchen, including people's heartbeats to tell if they are lying. Research is still on-going, however, in some cases, the loss of sight among disabled/impaired people can promote the remaining senses and 'enhance' them, if they are used frequently (Keller, 2015). The reliance and use of the remaining senses, as opposed to the other senses compensating for the loss of one, provides a more logical and realistic interpretation of Daredevil's abilities, although in all narratives, they are exaggerated.

A crucial difference between the film and the television series is the actor's ability to act as 'blind'. Since neither Affleck nor Cox are blind in real-life, both had to prepare to portray blindness through Daredevil/Murdock. Affleck prepared for the role by working with motivational speaker/blind consultant Tom Sullivan, and Cox prepared for the role by working with blind consultant Joe Strechay (Lee, 2014; Shaw-Williams, 2015). While both production companies prepared the lead-actors for a realistic portrayal of blindness, the television series devotes more screen-time to the challenges Murdock experiences as a 'blind man'. In episode one of season one (*Daredevil*, Into the Ring), Murdock often relies on sound and touch in many of his daily activities.

For example, the loudspeaker system on his mobile phone informs him who is calling before he answers. Additionally, the light touches on table tops and the use of his cane navigates his spatial awareness (Perry, 2015).



(Fig.35 [Left] Still of Ben Affleck (Daredevil) in *Daredevil* [2003]). Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0287978/mediaviewer/rm825858048>.

(Fig. 36 [Right] Matt walking through New York scene, *Daredevil* [2015-]). Still of Charlie Cox (Daredevil). Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3322312/mediaviewer/rm546438400>.



Ironically, when Marvel/Netflix premiered the *Daredevil* television series, the option for audio description was not available. Disability rights advocates have been pressing streaming sites like Netflix to include audio description for disabled/impaired audiences for some time. Pressure from disability advocates and fans of Daredevil eventually prompted Netflix to introduce audio description, and implemented this request only four days after the initial release (Rosenberg, 2015). While audio description is expected from a show which portrays a super-crip, Netflix



complied and has continued to introduce audio description to their Netflix Original's titles (including all Marvel/Netflix properties) and more (Wright, 2015). With more television and film content being produced and distributed by streaming and home delivery services, it is sensible for Netflix to ensure that the blind/impaired community receives access to this content. Simultaneously, Netflix (and as an extension, Marvel) are able to capitalise on a market that may have not been catered for by other streaming sites (Spangler, 2016).

The representations of Professor X and Daredevil demonstrate a reflection of a more progressive society in regards to disability rights and representation. The number of disabled/impaired superheroes rose during the 1980s/1990s. Excluding the popular superheroine Misty Knight, who has a bionic arm, and appeared during the blaxploitation and kung-fu phase in the 1970s, the emergence of most disabled/impaired superheroes coincided with the introduction of disability law and the disability rights movement. DC's Cyborg first appeared in *DC Comics Presents* #26 in 1980 and is known for his metallic prosthetics after being disfigured by a creature from a different dimension. Most of his body and part of his face was replaced, and he learns to overcome his suicidal thoughts through his acquired superhuman strength. Similarly, Marvel's Cable has techno-organic body parts, a mechanical eye, and depending on the writer, telepathic and telekinesis powers, and the ability to travel through time. Both characters have become popular with comic-book fans through their self-titled comic-books and affiliations with superhero teams. More importantly, both characters are scheduled to make their debuts to the silver screen in 2017 and 2018. Cyborg (Ray Fisher) makes a brief appearance in *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* and will star in *Justice League* and in a self-titled *Cyborg* film sometime in 2020. Cable (Josh Brolin) will first appear in *Deadpool 2* (Leitch, 2018) and has signed a four-picture deal with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

As discussed previously, after her de-powerment Gordon became Oracle, something of a standard bearer for representations of disability in DC comic-books. *The Killing Joke* was adapted into an animated film (*Batman: The Killing Joke* [Liu, 2016]), but unlike the comic-book, provides Gordon/Batgirl (Tara Strong) with a more pivotal role within the narrative. Executive producer Bruce Timm stated that the first section of the film centres on Gordon's superhero career to further her character development, although some critics found this more problematic than the original narrative (Riesman, 2016; Moran, 2016). The incident still occurs and the portrayal of Gordon's recovery is not depicted, but the post-credit scene suggests the introduction of Gordon as Oracle, something that the comic-book did not consider.

What makes Gordon the most significant disabled/impaired superhero is her journey through learning about and coping with her disability. In *Oracle: Year One*, a storyline within *The Batman Chronicles Vol 1 #5* in 1996, the story continues where *The Killing Joke* ends and Gordon mentions to Batman how she was used as a pawn in Batman's conflict with the Joker and how she is coping with the reality of her disability. The narrative explores Gordon's depression, self-doubt and PTSD following the events that led to her paralysis (Cocca, 2014: section 11). She even addresses being a "weaker version" of Batman, regarding her former alter-ego and skillset as Batgirl before the incident (*Batman Chronicles Vol 1 #5*). In this issue, Gordon encounters the ups-and-downs of her disability, from feeling like a helpless victim to feeling empowered after training with a martial arts expert to develop her upper-body strength. She feels that the incident has pushed her outside of norms of able-bodiedness, gender and sexuality, particularly when she considers her future as a mother and wife (Cocca, 2014: section 13). Certainly, her narratives in the comic-book and film follow common disability tropes in media; however, she is regarded as the most influential disabled character within the superhero genre. Gordon avoids being placed as an object of pity

and through recovery, she learns to accept her disability, a rare image considering disabled men as super-crips dominate the superhero genre (Schwartz, 2010: p.842; Barnes, 2011: p.194).



(Fig. 37 Gordon as Oracle in *The Batman Chronicles: Oracle – Year One: Born of Hope #5* [1996]). Source: Google images.

Gordon’s ability to walk again caused controversy among fans and critics, who commented on the lack of disabled characters DC provides. Even feminist website *The Mary Sue* condemned the misogynistic themes running throughout *The Killing Joke*, disapproved of Gordon’s able-bodiedness (Sirkin, 2015). Yvonne Craig portrayed Gordon/Batgirl in the *Batman* television series shortly after her comic-book debut and since then, the character has featured in numerous Batman-related media, primarily animated television series and video games as a supporting character. The first live-action adaptation to depict Gordon’s transition from Batgirl to Oracle was in *Birds of Prey* (2002-2003). The television series was loosely based on the comic-book and received moderate reviews regarding the overall plot, yet, the series made an effort to portray a disabled character (West, 2017). With only slightly more than one percent of all (non-news) programmes featuring disabled people/characters, it is significant to see the portrayal of a lead-disabled female character in a relatively well-known television programme (Barnes, 2011: p.190). In this respect, the television industry is not dissimilar to the comic-book industry.



(Fig. 38 Still of Ashley Scott (Helena Kyle), Rachel Skarsten (Dinah Lance) and Dina Meyer (Barbara Gordon) in *Birds of Prey* [2002-2003]). Source:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0312098/mediaviewer/rm601031680>.

Gordon's popularity as a superheroine increased as she became a disabled icon. Considering DC's assurance to expand diversity within their superhero narratives, Gordon's return to an able-bodied Batgirl diminished her significance as a disabled icon for many comic-book fans and in turn, reduced the amount of disabled superheroines within their library. As Batgirl, Barbara would use her martial art skills, intelligence and weapons/gadgets to aid her on her missions against the criminals that plague Gotham. After her paralysis, and as Oracle, she used her genius-level intellect and photographic memory to develop her knowledge in electronics and computers, which led to her becoming an expert in computer-hacking. Other than a couple of notable superheroines that have previously been discussed, many disabled superheroines have been overlooked and/or performed as secondary/supporting characters. As mentioned, historically, the comic-book industry's mainstream audience consisted of white, young, middle-class male readers/audiences. Since then, the industry's demographic is almost an equal split between genders and involves a variety of races (Schenker, 2017). The comic-book industry's previous attempts to appeal to a particular demographic has been quite problematic, especially when considering the representation of diverse superheroines. However, some superheroines and their narratives are finally getting the recognition they deserve.

Despite this, Marvel's Vice President of Sales, David Gabriel stated that diversity does not sell when referring to the decline in Marvel's comic-book titles. The *Black Panther* comic-book became the best-selling title in April 2016 and has continued to perform well in sales. Additionally, Gabriel does mention that comic-book titles/characters, Squirrel Girl, Miles Morales, The Mighty Thor, Spider-Gwen, Ms. Marvel and Moon Girl continue to prove popular with comic-book fans/audiences (Shepherd, 2017). The majority of these qualify as re-imagined versions of a traditionally white male superhero, one that now exists in Marvel's mainstream universe. Even though re-imagined versions have existed in alternate-timelines for many years, Gabriel was most likely referring to the fact that some of these re-imagined/diverse superheroes remain problematic with Marvel's entrenched fans (these fans constitute a large part of their consumer market), which is partly due to the replacement of traditional superheroes. Marvel's lack of imagination led to the recycling of apex superheroes as diverse re-imaginings. Furthermore, Marvel's attention to the direct-market, traditional superhero titles and their intended readership have posed additional issues when considering diversity in comic-books (Thielman, 2017). Other than a couple of notable original superheroes, like Ms. Marvel, the comic-book industry should be creating more original/diverse superheroes. A flaw within the industry is the potential cancellation of a new comic-book title, as the risk of a small readership does not guarantee a profit and so, transforming an already-existing character/title limits the risk and guarantees revenue.

(Fig. 39 Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel in *Ms. Marvel* #19 [2017]). Source: [http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Ms. Marvel Vol 4 19](http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Ms._Marvel_Vol_4_19).



Before reverting their attention back to their traditional superheroes/titles, Marvel made a brief attempt to attract new readers with their diversified superheroes. Charles Hoffman has suggested that Marvel's declining sales is due to Marvel's re-launch of all their existing titles to compete with DC's Rebirth, the numerous crossover events between titles, and quick cancellations of new diverse superhero narratives (Hoffman, 2017).<sup>11</sup> The comic-book industry is also quick to cancel underperforming non-diverse superhero titles. For example, Marvel cancelled the *Squadron Supreme* comic-book and *Black Knight* comic-book amongst others due to underperforming sales (Barnhardt, 2016). Considering the historical representations of diverse superheroes and their narratives, the industry's attempts to expand their collection of diverse superheroes are slowly increasing and improving. Additionally, the creative teams behind the characters/narratives are also diversifying. Films and television series such as *Suicide Squad*, *Wonder Woman*, *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage* and *Agents of SHIELD* (American Broadcasting Company, 2013-), and upcoming films *Black Panther* and *Cyborg* have aimed to diversify superhero narratives and appeal to wider

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<sup>11</sup>All New, All Different Marvel (2015-2016) relaunched existing titles and introduced new titles, before another relaunch with *Marvel Now 2.0!* (2016), both of which did not ret-con past narratives.

audiences. As the transition of comic-book narratives over to film and television properties have made way to a larger and more diverse (mainstream) audience, the industry giants are attempting to appeal to this market through diversifying their arsenal of characters, narratives and settings, whilst simultaneously ensuring that they continue to appeal to their entrenched fan-base.

## **CONCLUSION**

Unsurprisingly, the predominant reason for the resurgence of superhero narratives, specifically in film and television is profit driven. In the midst of the current blockbuster era, the prominence of the superhero genre in film and television properties have successfully conveyed the comic-book industry's narratives to a wide-range audience. The companies' strategy for their cinematic properties, specifically in regards to connected cinematic universes enables Marvel and DC to successfully capitalise on a larger consumer market. Although adaptation theory is not vital (as fans enjoy both familiarity and distinction), it is important for the comic-book industry to consider comic-book readers (and their knowledge of superhero narratives) as an inherent market when it comes to their film and television properties.

Beyond this broad conclusion, several other, more nuanced revelations have become clear as a consequence of this research. First, that the majority of superhero comic-book/film narratives are socially-relevant to the time in which they were published/produced, which in turn, creates a larger consumer market and therefore a profitable result. The expansion of black and disabled superheroes, and the large quantity of socially-relevant narratives/themes, coincided with the current socio-political climate, and therefore catered towards a specific readership. The primary reason for the expansion of diverse superheroes and their narratives, derives from the demand made by consumers and potential markets which the industry has previously failed to entice. Comic-books have always appealed to a wide audience, although the industry has not always acknowledged this. Other than a small category of superheroes and their titles (as previously mentioned), the creative works that have been distributed by the comic-book industry in the past have been designed to appeal to specific audiences, thus alienating potential markets. The



adaptations are intentionally made for mainstream audiences where the majority of them have been financially successful.

Therefore, the opportunities which have recently been offered to an influx of diverse characters/superheroes boils down to the companies' desire to increase revenue. While this can be seen as progressive for diverse superheroes and a more diverse readership/audience, some diverse superheroes are considered to be part of the problem. The lack of original diverse superheroes and the recycling of apex superheroes have posed a problem for both embedded comic-book fans and newcomers, as frequently, their intended audiences are aware of their previous iterations and/or they cannot empathise with the recycled superheroes every-day issues. Marvel and DC's attempts at creating modern and diverse superheroes/characters have developed within the contemporary context and can be seen as more progressive (May, 2016). However, these attempts are not always realised, as taking on a new title does not guarantee readership or profit. Furthermore, the success of the title and/or adaptation also depends on the creative teams behind the text.

As the first sub-section uncovered, the industries' creative teams often present an individual interpretation of the superhero and/or narrative they engage with. The Spider-Man and Batman case studies highlight the industries' approach to superhero characters and their attempts to alter their characteristics to suit different readers/audiences. This reinforces the concept that apex superheroes in particular and their narratives are versatile, and more importantly, that the industries are willing to adapt superheroes and narratives for financial gain. To this end, adaptations into film and television properties are designed to attract mainstream audiences and maintain the interest of embedded comic-book fans to a different media. The Batman and Spider-

Man case studies alone indicate that the materials Marvel and DC adapt from are extremely broad, and that the industries' ability to provide audiences with different versions of the same superhero has been a profitable marketing strategy. This is evident in Marvel and DC's more recent inter-connected cinematic properties. While it can be occasionally argued that creative control is reduced for the creative teams behind the cinematic texts, the increase of cross-over events/prominence of inter-connected universes within comic-book narratives is becoming more apparent. Consequently, the strategies of the cinematic properties are being fed back into the comic-books (even though inter-connected universes have existed in comic-books for a long time, the industry is frequently employing this strategy as a means to interest a wider audience). However, in comparison to the inter-connected universe in cinematic properties, the cross-over events within comic-book narratives appear to be less successful with consumers, especially when considering the price per comic-book.

Nevertheless, this strategy has provided consumers with more diverse superheroes in cinematic properties, and the industry with profitable characters. Diverse superheroes are still being marginalized as secondary/supporting characters, and are often treated poorly. In *Agents of SHIELD*, the treatment of black characters (both the main cast and supporting characters) in particular, is problematic. Their roles are often short-lived, with characters being relegated as the series antagonists or experiencing torture and/or death. On the other hand, the two leading Asian women, Daisy Johnson/Skye (Chloe Bennet) and Melinda May (Ming-Na Wen) are treated significantly better than their black colleagues (Elle, 2014). While Cage was introduced through a series devoted to a white character, the *Luke Cage* series has presented a progressive depiction of a black protagonist. Similarly, superheroes such as Ms. Marvel have challenged the treatment and stereotypical depictions of diverse superheroes in comic-books. Without the inter-connected universes, the expansion and treatment of female superheroes/characters may have not improved

anytime soon. The inclusion of superheroines/characters in male-led/team-up narratives has presented an opening for the resurgence of female-led superhero narratives, specifically in cinematic properties. The expansion of female audiences/readers has also increased, resulting into an almost fifty-fifty split. This could be due to a number of factors, one being the normalisation of superheroines/female characters' bodies and the improved treatment of women over time. *Catwoman* in particular temporarily prevented female-led superhero films from being produced for many years, predominantly due to the lack of revenue.

Secondly, the acknowledgment of female audiences/readers as a potential market has had a large impact on the development of superhero narratives in recent years. The developments made by second-wave and third-wave feminist movements has coincided with the improved representation of superheroines/female characters and the industries' method of 'femsploitation'.<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Cocca's article explores the objectifying images of women in a number of Marvel and DC's comic-books (*Justice League, Avengers, Batgirl, Catwoman, Supergirl, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Fearless Defenders, Journey into Mystery Featuring Sif* and *Red She-Hulk*) through three time-periods (mid-1990s, mid-2000s and 2010s). She deduces that the titles (ensemble and female-headed) of the 2010s presented the lowest percentage of objectifying images of superheroines, with the 1990s representing the highest (Cocca, 2014: p.420). This decline in objectifying images and the damaging treatment of women in comic-book narratives has likely been accelerated by the socio-political subject-matters that have dominated the media since the announcement of the 2016 United States Presidential Election, particularly the candidates and the announcement of Donald Trump as president. Trump's opposition, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote against Trump in 2016 and was the first woman in history to be nominated for

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<sup>1</sup> The act of marketing a product/film to women.

presidency by a major American party (Sharman, 2016). Since Trump's inauguration, protests across the world have occurred, predominantly in response to his inauguration and his regressive socio-political viewpoints leading up to the election. Most notably was the Women's March which took place the day after President Trump's inauguration, originally designed for people who support women's rights and equality (Sanghani and Rahim, 2017). The recent female-led narratives in film, television and comic-books have provided female creative teams/members and female readers/audiences the opportunity to produce and relate to more superhero narratives. While opportunities for a more inclusive demographic (including female creative teams and female readers/audiences) have started to increase, opposition from the alternative-right has arisen. The #Comicsgate movement has targeted those calling for diversity within the comic-book industry and within superhero narratives.<sup>2</sup> Following a picture of a group of female Marvel staffers on Twitter who were celebrating the life of Flo Steinberg (a participant in Marvel's expansion during the 'Silver Age'), comicsgate advocates harassed said Marvel staffers and released a blacklist of comic-book creators who are women, people of colour, or left-leaning (Francisco, 2018). As previously mentioned, it is recognisable that both entrenched readers and newcomers of superhero narratives have difficulties accepting a female version or an ethnically diverse recycling of a previously white superhero, and many deduce this concept as lazy writing and lacking imagination. Despite this, the readership of females to males is almost an equal split, with ethnically-diverse readers slowly increasing (Schenker, 2017). The female-led and left-leaning narratives the comic-book industry are implementing are being positioned against 'Trump culture', and therefore, they have additional meaning to comic-book readers due to the times.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The movement state they want quality comic-books without the promotion of radical far-left ideologies ruining the narratives and sales of comic-books.

<sup>3</sup> 'Trump culture' refers to dominant culture; where one cultural practice is dominant within a social, political or economic entity in which multiple cultures are present.

Since its inception, the comic-book industry and its superhero narratives have always presented a socio-political stance. In the 1940s, Johnny Everyman often dealt with socio-political issues that were well-intentioned, yet problematic to the modern reader (Goodrum, 2013: p.218-219). Similarly, during this time Captain America assisted with the war effort, and later became cynical about the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal in *Captain America* #180 in 1974. Modern superheroes and their narratives whether in their original format, or their adapted properties, mediate socio-political statements about modern society. Perhaps it is modern-day superheroes, like Squirrel Girl and Ms. Marvel that are gathering more attention about their socio-political involvement and viewpoints because of the disillusioned perception regarding the culture and leadership of the United States. The representation of women in superhero narratives has existed as long as the genre itself, however, the industry's inclusion of socio-political issues, gradual improvements of the treatment and depiction of superheroines/female characters and the expansion of female creative teams are purposely pursued for the industry to capitalise on the female market and continue the success of the superhero genre.

Thirdly, the subject and opportunity of a more diverse spectrum of superheroes has also come to the fore. Black superheroes and disabled superheroes have been portrayed in numerous stereotypical fashions where they often dealt with stereotypical issues within their narratives. Some superheroes have successfully challenged this, most notably Black Panther and Gordon as Oracle. Yet, their original narratives corresponded with the historical socio-political context the United States experienced. The majority of black superheroes emerged during the Civil Rights Movement and blaxploitation phase, with a few disabled/impaired superheroes appearing during the beginning of the disability rights movement in the 1960s. A larger influx of disabled superheroes started to appear during the height of the disability rights movement and alongside

the introduction of disability laws during the 1990s. With the introduction of black superheroes in contemporary cinematic properties, the inclusion of current socio-political issues that have been headlining numerous media outlets has also been prominent. Previously considered, the Black Lives Matter movement and police brutality is frequently referenced throughout the *Luke Cage* television series. Trump's failure to denounce white supremacists and neo-Nazis regarding the incidents that occurred at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in August 2017 reinforces the industries' source for socio-political themes to be explored within their modern narratives (Oppenheim, 2017).<sup>4</sup> Historical and contemporary socio-political events have and continue to inspire the industries' choice of themes within their superhero narratives. Recently, DC has stated that the current socio-political climate under Trump motivated DC to introduce a female Muslim superheroine called Zari Adrianna Tomaz in DC's *Legends of Tomorrow* (The CW Television Network, 2016-) television series, and acknowledged they lacked diverse representation (Wagmeister, 2017).<sup>5</sup>

The representation of diverse superheroes/characters is still limited, especially when comparing the number of diverse superheroes to their predominantly white male affiliates. The representation of diverse superheroes, like female superheroes, is increasing, although it is a slow process. With the increased collection of diverse superheroes, specifically their role in adapted narratives, the growth of a more diverse readership/audience is foreseeable. The industries' aim to attract and capitalise on the inclusion and representation of diverse superheroes/characters is evident through the expansion of diverse superheroes in their comic-book and adapted narratives. However, the recycling of white superheroes into black interpretations, for instance, continues to

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<sup>4</sup> Controversy ensued after the publication of *Captain America* #602 (2010) from the conservative Tea Party movement: <http://comicsalliance.com/captain-america-tea-party-controversy/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam and Representation* (2017) by A. David Lewis & Martin Lund.

pose a problem for many entrenched readers/audiences and newcomers. The casting of Johnny Storm (a traditionally white superhero) in the *Fantastic Four* (Trank, 2015) reboot caused controversy as he was played by black actor Michael B. Jordan. Fans of the *Fantastic Four* cited the casting as political correctness or an effort to meet a racial quota, resulting with Jordan responding to the casting as a creative decision and 'reflection of what a modern family looks like today' (Roth, 2015). The industry will succeed in capitalising on a larger, more diverse market via the inclusion of socio-political issues within their superhero narratives, as long as they can maintain the interest of entrenched fans. As mentioned, these fans prioritise fidelity/recognisability of reliable versions of superhero characters, in addition to the quality of superhero narratives over the diverse-driven superhero narratives that are in accordance with the current social climate. Entrenched fans are of paramount importance to Marvel and DC as they invest more in monthly comic-book titles, despite these fans not always being content with the publishers or their narratives. The strategy of an inter-connected universe, specifically within their cinematic properties have enabled Marvel and DC to interest a wider audience in their authentic properties and upcoming cinematic texts. The ability to mould narratives to the current socio-political issues, making the narratives and the superheroes relatable to the modern audience, has enabled the film, television and comic-book industries to capitalise on a larger consumer market. Overall, the resurgence of superhero narratives and the success of the genre itself is a consequence of financial motivation. Therefore, the increased diversity now more prominently seen within superhero narratives is a direct result of the industries' desire for money.

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\*Films released between 2016 and 2017 in Tables 1, 2 and 3 have not been adjusted to inflation due to them being recent releases.

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## APPENDIX:

**TABLE 1**

Film Title	Domestic Gross	Lifetime Theatres	Opening Day	Opening Gross	Worldwide Gross	Opening Theatres
<i>Spider-Man</i> (2002)	\$538,590,083	3,876	\$52,573,236	\$153,215,074	\$1,096,252,386	3,615
<i>Spider-Man 2</i> (2004)	\$474,659,678	4,166	\$51,384,373	\$112,006,943	\$995,814,760	4,152
<i>Spider-Man 3</i> (2007)	\$389,547,841	4,324	\$69,269,513	\$174,923,661	\$1,031,221,008	4,252
<i>The Amazing Spider-Man</i> (2012)	\$273,914,795	4,318	\$36,605,039	\$64,816,847	\$792,305,830	4,318
<i>The Amazing Spider-Man 2</i> (2014)	\$205,656,782	4,324	\$35,652,922	\$92,874,097	\$718,778,388	4,324
<i>Captain America: Civil War</i> (2016)	\$408,084,349	4,226	\$75,502,161	\$179,139,142	\$1,153,304,495	4,226
<i>Spider-Man: Homecoming</i> (2017)	\$333,528,381	4,348	\$50,780,982	\$26,915	\$879,598,965	4,348

**TABLE 2**

Film Title	Domestic Gross	Lifetime Theatres	Opening Day	Opening Gross	Worldwide Gross	Opening Theatres
<i>Batman: The Movie</i> (1966)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Batman</i> (1989)	\$486,186,291	2,201	\$29,764,315	\$78,369,536	\$796,182,429	2,194
<i>Batman Returns</i> (1992)	\$278,551,300	2,644	\$30,970,452	\$78,156,596	\$456,444,994	2,644
<i>Batman Forever</i> (1995)	\$289,821,228	2,893	\$31,570,151	\$83,127,516	\$529,982,613	2,842
<i>Batman &amp; Robin</i> (1997)	\$160,490,954	2,942	\$24,098,427	\$64,110,438	\$356,207,955	2,934
<i>Batman Begins</i> (2005)	\$254,203,951	3,858	\$18,517,736	\$59,903,978	\$459,882,750	3,858
<i>The Dark Knight</i> (2008)	\$596,228,434	4,366	\$74,871,656	\$176,587,715	\$1,119,822,104	4,366
<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i> (2012)	\$468,463,987	4,404	\$79,190,683	\$168,184,173	\$1,134,145,397	4,404
<i>Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice</i> (2016)	\$330,360,194	4,256	\$81,558,505	\$166,007,347	\$873,260,194	4,242
<i>The LEGO Batman Movie</i> (2017)	\$174,319,215	4,088	\$14,493,258	\$53,003,468	\$307,319,215	4,088

**TABLE 3**

Film Title	Domestic Gross	Lifetime Theatres	Opening Day	Opening Gross	Worldwide Gross	Opening Theatres
<i>Catwoman</i> (2004)	\$51,079,155	3,117	\$7,741,240	\$21,254,292	\$104,315,223	3,117
<i>Elektra</i> (2005)	\$29,997,461	3,204	\$5,471,685	\$15,735,996	\$69,656,798	3,204
<i>Suicide Squad</i> (2016)	\$325,100,054	4,255	\$64,893,248	\$133,682,248	\$745,600,054	4,255
<i>Wonder Woman</i> (2017)	\$412,497,440	4,165	\$38,247,254	\$103,251,471	\$821,497,440	4,165