The Dissertation Committee for Andrew D. Hamsher Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

"You've Become Part of a Bigger Universe":
Authorship, Stan Lee, and the Rise of Superhero Cinema

Committee:

Janet M. Davis, Co-Supervisor

Tom Schatz, Co-Supervisor

Cary Cordova

Mark C. Smith

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by

Andrew Donaldson Hamsher

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Andrew Donaldson Hamsher, PhD

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Supervisors: Janet M. Davis & Tom Schatz

In 1961 Marvel Comics' editor/writer Stan Lee, artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, and a group of other creative collaborators introduced a new, realistic approach to superhero comics. In the years that followed, Marvel's creative team began to develop a heavily-serialized, continuity-reliant form of storytelling this dissertation terms "comic book poetics." During the same period, Lee redefined the industrial process whereby comics were created and began to aggressively credit Marvel's creative staff and assert his own authorial presence. After decades of cross-media efforts on the part of Lee and other Marvel executives, Marvel Studios has become one of the dominant forces in 21st century Hollywood, playing a key role in the larger wave of superhero cinema which has made comic book poetics one of the primary narrative techniques in American pop culture. Marvel Studios has also become a driving force in the reshaping of film authorship, as traditional sources of authorship are destabilized and a more explicitly industrialized creative system has emerged, one that bears striking similarities to that found in the comic industry.

This study seeks to understand Marvel's rise to prominence within the culture industries and its effect on pop culture authorship. It explores the history of Marvel's cross-media efforts since 1961, investigating how they were affected by changes within the comic, film, and television industries and by larger cultural events such as the rise of Pop Art and the Women's Movement. It also explores evolving ideas of authorship within the comic industry and their interaction with conceptions of authorship prevalent in other culture industries. This study conducts these explorations by focusing on the figure of Stan Lee, who was at the center of Marvel's cross-media efforts for several decades and embodied the conflicting ideals of Romantic and collaborative authorship that defined the comic industry.

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Introduction

It is a standard sequence for the era of comic-book cinema. Rocket Racoon, Yondu Udanta, and Groot are racing to save Starlord from his malevolent father, Ego the Living Planet. The camera watches in an extreme long shot as their spaceship pinballs wildly through a colorful cosmos, occasionally cutting to close-ups that show the heroes' faces being comically distorted by the speed of their progress. Suddenly, we are on the surface of a rocky, barren planet as the protagonists' ship zooms by overhead. Rather than continuing to follow its ricocheting path through the heavens, the frantic forward motion of the plot ceases as the camera turns its attention to a small cluster of isolated figures watching the ship's progress from the surface of the planet. Three tall, ethereal, cape-draped figures with outsized bald heads cluster around a man seated on a small rock outcropping. Though the man's hand gestures are lively, his advanced age is obvious, and the viewer is struck by the realization that the stone seat was likely designed so that that he didn't have to stand for lengthy periods during the film shoot. The old man's age is highlighted by his costume, a padded orange spacesuit reminiscent of those seen in the science-fiction b-movies of the 1950s. Inside the large glass helmet, the man's face boasts a distinctive mustache and a futuristic pair of sunglasses. Dismissing the momentary distraction of Yondu's spaceship, the man turns to his companions and remarks, "Aw, man. Anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted - that time, I was a Federal Express man…"

The moment, featured in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017), is incomprehensible within the text of the film. We have never seen the old man or the bald aliens before, and they won't return until a brief shot at the end of the picture. None of the four have any impact on the plot. Yet this brief sequence is one of the most meaningful in the entire film. It is the culmination of more than fifty years of cross-media interaction between Marvel Comics and other culture industries. It is also a key moment in an ongoing struggle over the nature of authorship that has riven the comic industry for decades. As comic

books and, particularly, Marvel comics have come to play a central and influential role in American pop culture in the 21st century, effecting the kind of media Hollywood makes, the way it produces it, and the way audiences consume it, these same issues of authorship have begun to play out on a much larger, more mainstream stage.

Even the most casual fan of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) will recognize the old man as Stan Lee, the legendary editor and writer who played a key role in the creation of the pantheon of characters who form the basis for one of the most successful media franchises the world has ever seen. Dedicated Marvel Comics fans will recognize the three bald men as well. They are Watchers, a race of aliens first introduced in 1963's Fantastic Four adventure, "The Fantastic Four Versus the Red Ghost and his Indescribable Super-Apes!"[1] Fixtures of the Marvel Universe for the next 54 years, the Watchers are audience surrogates, aliens tasked with watching all the significant events in the universe but prohibited from interfering with them. By talking to the Watchers, Lee is essentially addressing the audience directly. This point is hammered home after the film's closing credits, when we briefly return to Lee and the Watchers. The bald aliens are slowly walking away from Lee as the comic creator pleads, "Hey fellas, hey wait, where ya goin'? Hey you were supposed to be my lift home! How will I get outta here? Hey, aw, gee, I've got so many more stories to tell. Aw, guys. Aw, gee." He might as well be talking to the audience, which, like the Watchers, is in the process of leaving the theatre and Lee behind.

What is the nature of the "stories" that Lee is so desperate to tell the audience? That question is answered by Lee's earlier mention of the time he "was a Federal Express man." That odd comment is a reference to Lee's cameo in an earlier film, *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), in which he appeared as a befuddled delivery man with a package for one of the film's heroes, Tony Stark. Lee has made such cameos in every MCU feature since the franchise began with *Iron Man* in 2008. In fact, calling Lee's

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[1] Stan Lee, "The Fantastic Four Versus the Red Ghost and his Indescribable Super-Apes!" Fantastic Four No. 13, 1963.

appearances cameos is somewhat misleading: his appearances in MCU films have become major

spectacles unto themselves, promoted in the press and conjectured about by fans. They have grown in

complexity over the years, interrupting the narrative flow of the film to a greater and greater degree.

Sitting on that rock in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, Lee clarifies the nature and purpose of those

appearances. In each MCU film, Lee is not playing a part within the fiction of the movie but rather

appearing as Stan Lee, an entity who transcends the text of the MCU. As his conversation with the

Watchers makes clear, the MCU is a story Lee is telling the audience. He is the author of the Universe in

its entirety.

Marvel Studio's positioning of Lee as the author figure for all MCU films – and, indeed, for all

Marvel-related media – is a response to sweeping changes Marvel's pop culture domination has brought

to the way Hollywood authors stories in the 21st century. Marvel, like all major comic publishers,

produces their books via an industrialized process defined by a division of creative labor and governed by

strict editorial control. This process bares striking similarities to the classical Hollywood studio system

that authored American films beginning in the 1920s. That system shattered in the late '50s, and film

authorship, both as a concept and as a practical reality, became scattered as stars, directors, agents and

writers all vied for control of the filmmaking process. As films based on Marvel and DC comics have

become increasingly important to Hollywood in the 21st century, they have popularized a unique way of

telling stories – what I call comic book poetics. This poetics positions each installment of a franchise,

whether it is a film, TV show, video game, or other type of media, as part of a potentially infinite fictional

universe. The comic industry's standardized, factory-like production process, a process it has refined

over its decades of existence, is ideally adapted to produce these universe-focused, heavily serialized

narratives. Thus, as Hollywood has come to rely more and more on comic book movies, it has begun to

return to a producer-driven, industrial mode of authorship that diminishes the importance of any

individual creator. The appeal of romantic authorship is powerful, however, and for a variety of reasons it

is useful for studios to present audiences with an author figure to oversee their proprietary storyworld. No franchise has an individual better suited for this role than Marvel has in Stan Lee.

This study follows two major threads. First, it seeks to understand how Marvel has come to play such a central role in American popular culture by exploring the history of the publisher's cross-media efforts. Since writer/ editor Stan Lee, artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, and their creative collaborators revitalized the superhero comic in 1961, Marvel has proved the more vital of the two major comic publishers, and since 1967 has consistently outsold the comics published by rival DC.[2] Despite Stan Lee's best efforts, this vitality has not translated into success in bringing Marvel properties to film and television. Rival DC was assimilated into a vertically-integrated entertainment conglomerate in 1969 and has enjoyed frequent, if sporadic, success in developing cross-media adaptations of their key properties, programs like *Batman* (1966-1968) and *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979) and films like 1989's *Batman*. Marvel's cross-media efforts have proved less fruitful, usually depending on reflected glory from a DC film or TV series to meet success. These efforts have also been deeply effected by broader cultural changes such as the rise of Pop art and the Women's Movement. Marvel's cross-media fortunes changed dramatically in 2000, when Marvel began a rapid ascent that would see it become one of the most powerful forces in American pop culture.

This study also seeks to understand how Lee positioned himself on that rock in outer-space – how he established himself as Marvel's sole author figure. That process began, along with Marvel's comic-based universe of superheroes, in 1961. Lee's actions were consistently defined by two competing impulses that mapped to his dual role as Marvel's sole editor and chief writer: he designed, implemented and oversaw Marvel's industrialized production process and thrived on the collaboration it encouraged while at the same moment longing for recognition as a traditional romantic author. Thus, even at the

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[2] Jean-Paul Gabilliet, <u>Of Comics and Men</u>, transl. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009)

moment Lee changed the way comic artists were credited, publicizing every member of the creative process for the first time, he worked diligently to define and exert his own authorial voice. The clash between the romantic ideal of individual authorship and the industrial reality of comic production runs through Marvel's history.

It is difficult to overstate how central comic books in general and Marvel in particular is to 21st century pop culture. Since 2000, every major studio has distributed at least one film based on a Marvel property and three studios (Fox, Disney, and Sony) rely heavily on continuing Marvel transmedia franchises. 44 Marvel-based films, along with an array of TV series, video games, DVD shorts, and other media, have been released between 2000 and 2017. If we consider films based on DC characters as well, the number of films based on properties from the two major comic publishers comes to 58. This is in sharp contrast to the years preceding 2000, during which only 19 films based on DC and Marvel were ever released. As Hollywood's eagerness to produce such films suggests, they tend to be tremendously successful at the box office. In 2016, Marvel's *Captain America: Civil War* was the highest internationally grossing film of the year. Three other films based in the DC or Marvel cinematic universes were among the year's ten highest grossing features. The staggering number of and consistent success of Marvel films only begins to describe the impact comic books have had on Hollywood. Almost every major blockbuster series – from James Bond to The Fast and the Furious – has adopted a variation of comic book poetics and with them the comic industry's factory-like production process. This study is an attempt to understand how that happened and what it means for pop culture authorship.

Some Brief Histories

The intimate association between comic books and superheroes is largely a product of the 1960s. Originally, comic books encompassed a wide variety of genres. Comic books emerged as a distinct form

of cultural production in 1933, evolving out of a variety of types of illustrated storytelling, most notably the newspaper comic strip. The American comic book vaulted to prominence with the 1938 debut of Superman in DC's *Action Comics* #1. During the war years, superheroes, often with strong nationalistic undertones, dominated the medium, as dozens of publishers tried to develop their own version of the Man of Steel. The popularity of the superhero comic waned dramatically with the coming of peace, and a variety of new genres began to take over the comic market. Westerns, funny animals, sci-fi, and romance comics filled the void left by costumed crusaders. Two of the most popular new genres were the crime and horror comic, and the gory images and salacious behavior that filled such books played a key part in occasioning the mid-50s backlash that almost destroyed the industry.

By the late '50s superheroes had lost almost all their currency within the comic industry, being viewed as little more than remnants of an obsolete past. Though DC's heroes Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman had been published continually since the superhero fad faded in the late '40s, in the last years of the '50s editor Julius Schwartz began to experiment with new versions of some of the publisher's other characters.

DC's updated heroes found success, but had nothing like the impact of the new characters produced by rival publisher Marvel. Between cover dates November 1961 and April 1964, editor and writer Stan Lee and artists including Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Don Heck, and Wally Wood innovated a new approach to superhero stories. Superheroes like Superman had traditionally been stiff, single-dimensional figures, with little in the way of emotional depth. With the release of *The Fantastic Four* #1 in 1961, the Marvel creative team introduced a new kind of hero, one who experienced relatable problems and became involved in complex interpersonal relationships. Marvel's characters bickered and fought, acted on less-than-virtuous impulses, and generally behaved in realistic ways. Discussing Spider-Man, the character who most exhibited this new approach, Stan Lee explained the unique perspective Marvel brought to the superhero genre in the early '60s:

…I thought it'd be even more interesting to make him a kid with the normal problems that so many teenagers have.

He's not the most popular guy in school. He was busy looking after his aunt who was old, like 150 years old. He was always having to get medicine for her and worry about her. She didn't have enough money for the rent. And I wanted him to be the kind of guy who'd have allergy attacks, and ingrown toe nails, and occasionally when he'd have a fight with a villain his costume would get torn and he did know how to sew. You couldn't go to a tailor and say would you fix my Spiderman costume. So I wanted all those little things to happen.[3]

In the early '60s, Lee and his collaborators used this new approach to superheroes to create a pantheon that included Spider-Man, The Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, the X-Men, Thor, Ant-Man, Daredevil, and a host of other characters. These heroes remain the core of Marvel's media empire today.

The popularity of the superhero would still wax and wane – in the early '70s, for instance, the two major publishers cut back on superheroes in favor of a resurgence of horror comics and experiments with new genres – but their domination of the medium would never be seriously challenged. Publishers outside the "Big 2" would occasionally emerge and test the market with other types of books, as in the heyday of the underground comix movement of the late '60s and early '70s or the avalanche of small black-and-white publishers in the '80s. While alternatives came and went, DC and Marvel's overwhelming control of the market ensured that, in the perception of the majority both inside and outside the comic industry, comic books and superheroes were synonymous.

The modern comic industry is still dominated by two publishers, Marvel and DC, who release the lion's share of books on the market. This study focuses on Marvel, which was founded by Martin

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[3] Renee Montagne, "Stan Lee on Realism in the World of Comic Heroes," *NPR,* 27 Dec. 2006, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6684820

Goodman in 1939 as Timely Publications. Though Goodman remained publisher until he was replaced by Stan Lee in 1972, the company changed its name frequently, going by the label Atlas during the '50s and sometimes appearing with no brand name at all before settling on Marvel in 1961 as its identity began to solidify around the superhero books produced by Stan Lee and his collaborators.

This study largely confines itself to adaptations of superheroes published by DC and, particularly, Marvel. As by far the most visible comic publishers and, eventually, as integral components of vertically- and horizontally-integrated media conglomerates, DC and Marvel have been the most active and successful publishers when dealing with other media industries. This has not always been the case – as Marvel floundered in bankruptcy in the '90s Hollywood briefly became infatuated with characters produced by several new publishers precisely because they lacked the deep continuity which, a decade later, would play an integral role in facilitating the rise of comic book cinema. In general, since the collapse of most of the first wave of comic publishers in the '50s, the story of comic books in Hollywood has been the story of DC and Marvel.

<u>Comic Book Poetics</u>

My understanding of what I term comic book poetics owes a great deal to Henry Jenkins' landmark *Convergence Culture*. In that study, Jenkins presents the Matrix franchise as an example of a new kind of transmedia, worldbuilding blockbuster franchise. As Jenkins explains, "More and more, storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium."[4] Where traditional

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[4] Henry Jenkins, <u>Convergence Culture</u>, (New York: New York University Press, 2006) 114

Hollywood storyteling focused on a single linear storyline and worked to ensure that audiences could understand the plot at all times, the individual episodes that are part of worldbuilding franchises feature narratives that are full of "gaps and excesses,"[5] spaces within the text that gesture to a larger storyworld beyond the confines of the immediate narrative. Such spaces encourage viewers to engage with other elements of the franchise, often in other media, in order to better understand the storyworld's narrative. The fundamental truth of these new, storyworld franchises is that, "The whole is worth more than the parts."[6]

Jenkins describes this emerging narrative form as transmedia storytelling, part of a larger phenomenon of media convergence. Jenkins' terminology emphasizes the fact that franchises like The Matrix scatter their narrative information across films, video games, comics, and a range of other media. I have chosen to dub this heavily-serialized, continuity-reliant form of storytelling comic book poetics for several reasons. This study focuses on the comic book lineage of the universe building that Jenkins correctly argues is so central to modern American culture industries. Superhero comics, particularly those released by the major publishers Marvel and DC, have been developing this intricate, narratively open form of storytelling since the '30s. The evolution of this poetic form intensified dramatically with the early '60s Marvel Revolution, achieving a level of baroque complexity by the early '90s that dwarfed even the expansive worldbuilding found in the Matrix series. Comic book poetics, unlike transmedia storytelling, may take place across multiple installments of the same media. In fact, the development of comic book poetics is a necessary precondition for the advent of transmedia storytelling. It is the serialized, worldbuilding narrative form in which multiple storylines intertwine and overlap that allows for a single story to be segmented and distributed across multiple media.

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[5] Convergence Culture 98

[6] Convergence Culture 101

At the core of comic book poetics is the idea that the story of the overarching world matters just as much, if not more, than the tale of any individual hero. To achieve this worldbuilding, superhero comics rely on seriality and continuity. Seriality has not been historically confined to comic books, of course, appearing in earlier mediums like film and radio serials, soap operas, and dime novels, all of which have played a part in shaping the superhero comic genre. The sheer number of storyworld episodes that DC and Marvel produce – in December 2016, Marvel published 77 different comic books set in their principle narrative universe while DC published 60 – and the comic industry's willingness to deprive audiences of any form of narrative closure for long periods of time has allowed the comic industry to take serialization to previously unseen levels of complexity. Above all else, because no single episode is complete unto itself, each installment must remain open. Narrative openness is vital to superhero storytelling; no future narrative path can be permanently closed. The most obvious manifestation of this openness is the constant use of cliffhangers, endings in which one or more plot threads are left unresolved. It also manifests itself in the impermanence of comic death: the death and subsequent revival of heroes and villains is a frequent occurrence in superhero stories.

Superhero comics also rely heavily on continuity to construct an overarching universe. I have divided continuity into two types. Comic superhero universes generally encompass every character published under a particular imprint and thus rely heavily on horizontal continuity – events in any one of Marvel's 77 books published in a given month may have a direct effect on the narrative in any other. Comic book poetics also emphasize vertical continuity, meaning that every single event depicted in a story published by DC or Marvel is part of the history of their respective universes and may have direct relevance to any current or future stories. Over the years, both Marvel and DC have become less concerned with guiding readers through this intricate continuity. In the '60s, if an event in another contemporary or past book became significant to a story, a note from Stan Lee or one of DC's editors would direct readers to the relevant issue. Today, readers are often expected to have an encyclopedic knowledge of a fictional universe's history and make the connection to other issues on their own. In part,

this is simply a result of the fact that comic book continuity has grown so complicated and past events impact current storylines so frequently that it has become impractical to explain them individually.

Comic book poetics produces individual narrative units which would frustrate readers accustomed to more traditional styles of storytelling. Most comic issues feature a narrative with no clear beginning or end starring a cast with which the reader is expected to be already familiar. Characters frequently reference events from comics published decades earlier or stories that have just hit the newsstands. Heroes and villains from other storylines intrude into the action with little or no explanation. Events take place which have no bearing on the immediate narrative – the story may cut away for a page to reveal the separate activities of a character we haven't seen before and will not see again before the issue ends or a panel may emphasize an object that has no relevance to the story being told. The overall effect is that the reader is catching a brief glimpse into a sprawling world that develops constantly, whether or not the reader is paying attention.

Transmedia From Birth

Comic books did not merely contribute to the history of "transmedia storytelling" by developing a form of storytelling that allowed narrative information to be scattered across multiple media. They also laid the groundwork for the 21st century rise of transmedia narratives through a historical pattern of near-constant negotiations with other culture industries in an effort to adapt comic book IPs to other media. Since the advent of the superhero, comic publishers have labored to build partnerships with other culture industries and have proven uniquely able and willing to alter their characters and narratives in order to facilitate such alliances. Many histories of the comic industry, particularly those written prior to the dynamic success of Marvel Studios, have treated its interactions with other media industries as a side note. Such an approach risks offering an incomplete depiction of the growth and impact of the comic

industry which, almost from its first moments, was involved in a uniquely cross-media process of creation. Indeed, though individual storylines concerning DC's superheroes were, prior to the 21st century, almost always confined to the pages of comic books, their overall mythology – the extent of a superhero's powers, their supporting cast, the tone of the stories in which they appeared, etc. – was often developed across multiple forms of media.

Superman's development into the iconic figure we know today offers a perfect example of this process. Superman was created by a pair of young men from Cleveland, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster. The character was an immediate hit after his 1938 debut in *Action Comics*, and publishers Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz moved quickly to capitalize on the character's popularity by adapting him into as many other forms of media as possible. A newspaper comic began its run in 1939, a radio serial debuted in 1940, and a series of theatrical shorts animated by the Fleisher Studios appeared in 1941.

These iterations were not strictly ancillary, instead contributing vital elements to the Superman mythology that drives a billion-dollar storyworld to this day. An art error in the newspaper comic rendered the previously red-headed supervillain Lex Luthor bald forever. The radio show introduced Metropolis mainstays Perry White and Jimmy Olsen. At his birth, Superman could merely "leap tall buildings in a single bound," a visual which the animators at the Fleisher Studios found absurd when they attempted to translate it into motion. Instead, they resolved that the character should be able to fly, adding their own contribution to the developing Superman myth. Although theme parks wouldn't develop for seventeen years after Superman first graced the pages of DC comics, even one of that cultural form's predecessors exerted its influence on the new hero. Superman made his first live-action appearance at the 1939 World's Fair in New York, an event that showcased "the world of tomorrow." Seeking to tie the character more closely to the fair, DC dubbed him "the Man of Tomorrow," a nickname that has stuck to

the superhero for almost 80 years.[7] These earliest cross-media versions of the Man of Steel do not fit the definition of transmedia storytelling in the strictest sense; they did not contribute to a single, serialized storyline. They each contributed, however, to the formation of the character and world of Superman as we know them today.

Superman's cross-media origins were not a fluke. Comic industry executives and owners worked diligently to translate their characters to other media, though they met only spates of limited success. In the late '30s and '40s Superman and a few other comic heroes travelled a circuit of serialized, culturally marginal, child-directed media. The most visible outlet for such heroes were movie serials, and both Superman and Batman featured in 15-minute chapters designed to delight matinee audiences. Columbia Pictures and Republic Pictures also produced serials based on less remembered superheroes like Captain Marvel and Spy Smasher, and other non-super comic book denizens like Hop Harrigan, The Vigilante, Congo Bill, and Blackhawk.[8]

In the '50s, Superman remained the most visible superhero both inside and outside of comic books. His television series aired in syndication from 1952 to 1958, surviving the anti-comic panic enflamed by Dr. Fredric Wertham. The waning popularity of superheroes in comics was otherwise reflected in a dearth of such characters in other media. In 1966, comic stars briefly returned to television en masse, as the Pop Art craze and the subsequent success of the live-action Batman series excited public interest in the medium. A similar moment of mainstream interest took place in the late '70s, as the popularity of the Wonder Woman television program and the Superman feature opened the door for

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[7] Jake Rossen, Superman Vs. Hollywood, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008)

[8] One of the distinguishing elements of comic book production is that almost no character, no matter how outdated or unpopular, is ever completely discarded. After the comic industry came to be dominated by superhero storyworlds, all of these heroes except Harrigan were repurposed and integrated into DC's new continuity. Congo Bill, originally conceived as a swashbuckling adventurer, found himself transformed into a giant golden ape named Congorilla. In this new form he became a member of DC's primary superhero team the Justice League. Such are the vicissitudes of comic book storyworlds.

further comic book adaptations. In the '80s, Hollywood's turn towards blockbuster filmmaking, its acceptance of genres previously relegated to B-movies, and the increased demand sparked by the rise of VHS and other ancillary forms of content distribution seemed to create an environment that would welcome comic book superheroes in greater number to the world of cinema. Until the spectacular success of 1989's *Batman*, this was largely not the case, as superheroes remained confined to occasional, cheap, direct-to-video releases. In the late '90s Hollywood began to move towards a focus on storyworlds and their most famous denizens, the superhero. In 2008, Marvel Studios kicked off the creation of the unified MCU with *Iron Man* and excited a flurry of interest in comic-based films that has yet to abate.

The relationship between the comic industry and other media industries did not, as the story of Superman suggests, go only one way. Comic books thrived on adaptations of popular properties from other mediums, and publishers like Dell and Gold Key sustained themselves with comics based on characters created by animation studios such as Disney and Hanna-Barbera and adaptations of television programs including *Star Trek* (1966-1969) and *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964). Both Marvel and DC published a wide range of comics based on licensed properties, with *Star Wars* (1977) playing a particularly significant part in Marvel's history. Occasionally, these outside IPs could have a direct impact on the shape of the publisher's proprietary universes. In one such instance, creator Jack Kirby wrote and drew an adaptation of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in which he introduced a character, Machine Man, who was eventually integrated into the Marvel Universe proper and remains a popular secondary character.

Given this long and rich cross-media history, viewing the comic industry in relation to other culture industries is vital to understanding the development of the poetics, production, and reception of comic books themselves. For Stan Lee and many other comic creators, the comic page was at least partially a way to develop characters for other media, and the sort of characters who appeared there and what happened to them was often determined by the ebb and flow of inter-media partnerships. Not all of the characters Lee and his colleagues created with the hope of bringing them to other media actually made

that leap, of course. These failed attempts at adaptation can prove just as illustrative as the successes by revealing differences between the comic and film and television industries that fruitful cross-media partnerships may hide. Keeping that in mind, this history is just as concerned with cross-media partnerships that never reached fruition, with futile attempts by the comic industry to adapt in order to appeal to the more mainstream culture industries, and with projects that never advanced beyond an initial pitch. These failures have been just as vital in shaping the relationship between the comic industry and Hollywood as the more visible successes.

Production, Poetics, and Consumption

Though this study focuses on the production and authorship of comic books and comic book related media, that issue cannot be separated from considerations of comic book poetics and comic reception practices without offering an incomplete impression of the comic book cinema phenomenon. The serialized worldbuilding narrative form of comic book poetics is best managed by a producer-centered, industrialized form of artistic production. In turn, these storyworld-focused franchises dictate a much deeper level of commitment from fans, who must sift through various different manifestations of the franchise to find information regarding the narrative universe. Viewers who enjoyed a single Thor film, for example, are not merely encouraged to consume further Thor films. Instead, the distribution of plot elements featuring or related to the character across different types of media require the consumption of multiple different types of media related to the MCU. Viewers would need to watch the TV program *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-present), in which Thor's friend Sif appears and pursues a mission relevant to the film. They would need to buy Thor comics, play Thor videogames, and peruse the internet for Thor short films, all of which feature additional narrative information regarding Thor. They would become a fan.

The appeal of comic book poetics and the fan practices it encourages is at the core of Hollywood's newfound infatuation with comic based properties. Hollywood has yet to rise to this complex degree of continuity and seriality found in superhero comics, but certain universes – most notably those centered around characters featured in Marvel comics – are rapidly approaching such levels. With all of the Marvel and DC properties claimed, the economic appeal of franchise worldbuilding has also driven the culture industries to look to other sources for pre-sold properties with proven potential for serialization. One such source has been characters created outside of the comic industry but whose storyworld was developed in partnership with that industry. Such properties include the blockbuster Transformers franchise as well as other IPs including G.I. Joe and Conan the Barbarian. Intellectual properties with a connection to other historically serialized media such as radio and film serials or dime novels have also been mined by 21st century Hollywood. This approach has met with only limited success, more often then not producing failed franchises like Disney's John Carter of Mars and The Lone Ranger and Warner Bros.' The Legend of Tarzan. It is important to note that not all franchises which feature comic book poetics are based on characters who originated in comic books or another serialized media. It is a mark of the influence of the comic book narrative form that franchises with no connection to comics such as The Fast and The Furious have begun to structure themselves according to comic book poetics.

The Cultural Turn

The pages that follow place the comic industry's cross-media efforts within a broader cultural context, stepping outside the vacuum of the comic, film, and television businesses in order to understand how their interactions were shaped by social, cultural, and political forces. Though an awareness of political economy is vital to understand the relationship between various culture industries, it is also

important to remember that those relationships were forged by factors beyond simple economics. The mass culture critique, the artistic and political turmoil of the '60s, the Women's Movement, changing understandings of the city, and a host of other larger developments within American society all play a significant part in the story this study relates.

The early cross-media nature of the comic industry serves as a perfect example of the value of widening our view beyond industrial realities to encompass the broader cultural factors at play. In the 1930s and 1940s comic books were one of the most marginal cultural forms in the country. The publishers who produced such works occupied the fringes of respectability and frequently had a background producing other despised literature. Harry Donenfeld, who would become the owner of DC Comics, spent the late '20s and early '30s producing "girlie pulps" that were often little better than pornography, magazines with titles like *Juicy Tales*, *Hot Stories*, and *Spicy Adventures*.[9] Even before Fredric Wertham's crusade against comics in the mid-50s, national concerns about the nature of children's entertainment frequently focused on the young comic industry, as illustrated by the publication of Sterling North's 1940 *Chicago Daily News* article "A National Disgrace."[10] A large number of personnel in the early comic industry were creating comics not out of choice but because they were members of minority groups and the doors of more respectable artistic professions were closed to them by pervasive bigotry. When Superman proved to be phenomenally successful, the drive to adapt him into more respectable media such as radio was motivated by more than economics, though financial considerations certainly played a large part. It was an opportunity for comic publishers to achieve a greater degree of cultural respectability and for creators to improve their chances of moving to other

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[9] Gerard Jones, Men of Tomorrow, (New York: Basic Books, 2005) pg 60

[10] Jones

media. The broader cultural context set the terms for the interactions and negotiations between culture industries, as it does to this day.

<div align="center">Creating Comics</div>

In the pages that follow, authorship is examined from a number of perspectives. At one level, authorship is a functional question: how are comics and other media actually produced, how do these production processes evolve over time, and how do such processes relate to those found in other media industries? This work also explores how authorship is understood by various comic creators, comic consumers, and producers in other media dealing with the comic industry. These understandings are particularly changeable and complex, driven not only by trends within the industry – the rise, for instance, of a comic book auteurist movement – but by external cultural changes as well.

In *The Genius of the System* (1988), Thomas Schatz explores the classic Hollywood studio system, illuminating the way in which central producers like Irving Thalberg and Daryl Zanuck implemented and oversaw a standardized process of creative production that organized personnel according to a strict division of labor and churned out a steady stream of product that conformed to a particular studio's house style. The process was an industrial one, and it governed Hollywood from the '20s until the late '50s.[11] The system that produced American comic books was similarly industrial, and at Marvel, Stan Lee occupied a creative and administrative space equivalent to that of Thalberg and Zanuck. Shortly after the classic studio system experienced its final collapse, Marvel enjoyed a rush of success thanks to the new creative approach to superheroes initiated by Lee, artists Jack Kirby and Steve

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[11] Thomas Schatz, <u>The Genius of the System</u>, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988)

Ditko, and their colleagues. As Lee labored to deal with the increased demand for Marvel's comics, he instituted and refined a standardized process for comic creation, a version of one he had been using personally for several years. This process allowed a wide range of artists – writers, pencillers, inkers, colorists, letterers, etc. – to exert significant creative agency over the final comic while working within a shared style and ensuring that Lee retained control over the entire system. Lee dubbed this industrial process the Mighty Marvel Method and proudly promoted it in the pages of the publisher's comics. It quickly became a fundamental element of fans' understanding of Marvel's identity.

Marvel's system, though industrial, was actually less rigid then the traditional method of creating comics. In 1961, most comic companies operated in a manner similar to DC Comics. DC's comics were grouped into separate lines that were each supervised by an editor who answered to the Editor-in-Chief. For instance, comics featuring Superman and related characters – Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, Supergirl, Comet the Super-Horse, Beppo the Super-Chimp, etc. – were the closely-guarded province of tyrannical editor Mort Weisinger. These editors determined the sort of stories they wanted their comics to tell and would task writers to produce highly-detailed scripts complete with intricate descriptions of the art work to be featured in each panel.[12] These scripts would then be given to artists to illustrate exactly as written. If these pages of art met with the editor's approval, they would be inked, lettered, colored, each by a separate specialist, before being sent-out to a legion of eager readers.

Whereas DC had several editors, each guarding their own little bailiwick and tasked with ensuring a few comics reached the printers, Marvel had Stan Lee. In 1961, the year that Marvel began producing the characters that changed the comic industry and, eventually, launched one of the most successful pop culture franchises of all time, the struggling publisher had only two full-time employees, Lee and secretary Flo Steinberg. It hadn't always been thus; in the late '40s boom days of the comic

[12] Gabilliet

industry, Lee had overseen several editors in an arrangement much like that found at DC. But a 1957 financial crisis had reduced Marvel's staff to almost nothing, and in the early '60s its only two employees occupied a small office, little more than a closet, largely ignored on a floor dominated by the much larger staff of Martin Goodman's more successful periodicals.

Faced with editing every comic Marvel produced, Lee developed a system of artistic creation that heightened the process of collaboration, allowed multiple creators to significantly affect the final product, and made individual artistic contributions even more difficult to distinguish. The process also eliminated the need for Lee to write dozens of scripts a month. Lee described this highly collaborative creative process in a 1968 interview:

> Well, what we usually do is, with most of the artists, get a rough plot… I mean as much as I can write in longhand on the side of one sheet of paper… who the villain will be, and so forth. Then I call the artist – whoever's going to draw the strip… I read to him what I've written down, these few notes… and we discuss it. By the time we're through talking for about 20 minutes, we usually have some plot going. And we talk it out…, Then the artist goes home… or wherever he goes… and he draws the thing out, brings it back, and I put the copy in after he's drawn the story based on the plot I've given him.[13]

In most cases, all of a single issue's art would be drawn by one creator. After receiving the artwork, Lee would pencil numbered dialogue balloons into the art in the space the artist had provided and create a correspondingly numbered script. As Lee explained, this method allowed the writer to have an impact on the comics art as well as its prose: "when the writer indicates the balloons, he can design the page nicely and complement the art work. I know that if a panel has a lot of beautiful artwork, I'll keep the dialogue

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[13] Ted White, "A Conversation with the Stan," *Castle of Frankenstein* iss. 12, January 1968, pg. 88

sparse – if there's a dull panel, I'll write a lot of dialogue to fill up the panel."[14] Lee wrote almost all the

dialogue for which he was credited, though he occasionally enlisted help from other creators on aspects of

the work.   For instance, Lee's brother Larry Lieber, who wrote several of the early Marvel Age stories,

was often tasked with coming up with superheroes' civilian names. It was he who dubbed Iron Man Tony

Stark and Ant-Man Hank Pym.[15]

   After Lee and the penciller had completed their work, the script and artwork were sent to a

letterer who then sent the lettered pages to an inker. Some pencillers inked their own work, but it was

more common for the two roles to be separate. The inked art was then sent to a colorist. Each of these

specialists had an opportunity to put their own artistic imprint on the finished work. Inkers, for instance,

did not merely trace the penciller's lines but sometimes redrew portions of the art they found

unsatisfactory, often to the penciller's dismay. DC's Carmine Infantino, who drew the Flash revival that

preceded the Marvel Revolution and marked the first stages of superheroes' return to dominance in the

comic industry, explained that inker Joe Giella, "used to erase my pages down before he inked them. He

said he was fixing my drawing."[16] Inker Vince Colletta was infamous for such behavior and would even

erase the penciled lines of established artists like Jack Kirby. Colorists could also contribute significant

creative elements to the final product. For the first five or six years after 1961, colorist Stan Goldberg

was tasked with choosing the hues adorning the outfits of the publisher's many new heroes and villains:

"Stan says, 'You do whatever you think will look best.' He was too busy coming up with the ideas, and

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[14] John Hurd, "Stan Lee Interview," *Cartoonist PROfiles* iss. 4, Nov. 1969, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[15] Danny Fingeroth and Roy Thomas, Stan Lee Universe, (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2011) pg.

[16] Jim Amash and Eric Nolen-Weathington, Carmen Infantino, (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Press, 2010), pg 73

he trusted me in doing all that color stuff."[17] The penciler, writer, inker, letterer, and colorist had an identifiable impact on the creative shape of every comic Marvel produced.

In the studio system, film producers like Irving Thalberg answered to the studio's upper management in the New York office, which set budgets and determined the company's market strategy.[18] Lee didn't have to call across the country to receive that kind of guidance, he merely had to walk down the hall. Publisher Martin Goodman, though more interested in many of the other publications he oversaw, shaped his company's comic book output in several ways. In the mid-50s, Goodman had made an effort to expand his company by distributing his own comics. The attempt proved a disaster, and in 1957 Goodman was left with no choice but to make a deal with distributor Independent News to get his books to newsstands. Unfortunately, Independent News was owned by DC, and the comic book giant took the opportunity to attempt to squelch Goodman's operation. Independent agreed to distribute a meagre eight books a month, so until that deal expired in 1968, Lee was forced to work within boundaries brought about by Goodman's attempts to change the publisher's corporate structure.[19] As Marvel's new take on superheroes became popular, Lee had to convert old books in other genres to superhero titles and present the adventures of two heroes in separate stories in a single book.

Goodman also determined the company's approach to the market, dictating in broad terms the type of comics he wanted Marvel to produce. His overall approach was to latch onto any hot trend, flooding the market with derivative titles that imitated a successful comic or took advantage of a popular fad and cancelling the titles just as quickly when the moment passed. Goodman's fondness for imitation played a key role in initiating the Marvel Revolution; the Fantastic Four were created when Goodman

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[17] Fingeroth and Thomas, 30

[18] Schatz

[19] Gabilliet,

ordered Lee to create a comic that aped DC's successful Justice League. After Marvel's new approach to superheroes proved a hit, Goodman again mandated that successful books be copied; his demand for a new Fantastic Four prompted the creation of the X-Men while his order that Lee produce a new Spider-Man brought about the birth of Daredevil.

Marvel's comic production system was far more immediately responsive to fan input then the classic studio system, allowing readers to exert significant influence over the comics the publisher produced. In an attempt to build reader loyalty, Lee constantly invited feedback, and comics' monthly release schedule meant that he was able to respond to such input quickly. For instance, as part of the creative team's drive to make superheroes more realistic, the first issues of *Fantastic Four* eschewed many of the traditional trappings of the genre, including leotard-esque costumes for the eponymous team. This proved a bridge too far for Marvel's readers. Fans voiced their dissatisfaction, and by the third issue the team sported traditional superhero garb, their iconic blue color determined by Stan Goldberg.

<u>Marvel Style</u>

Lee's role within the Mighty Marvel Method was twofold: he functioned as both writer and editor. As writer, he helped artists develop the plotlines of individual issues, either by writing a brief synopsis from which the artist worked or, more often, by holding a story conference in which he and the artist would brainstorm and develop the plot of a particular comic. When the penciller completed the issue's artwork, Lee would fill the spaces the artist had left open with his increasingly distinctive and stylized dialogue.

As editor, Lee's duties and powers were far more expansive. Lee was responsible for managing Marvel's creative staff and freelancers. It was a task for which Lee's genuine amiability didn't particularly suit him, and he was well known for being very generous with salary advances and in finding

extra work for freelancers.[20] When Goodman decided that staff had to be cut, it was left to Lee to fire

personnel, a task which caused him genuine distress. Lee was far better suited to editorial duties that

were more closely tied to the actual process of comic creation. After deciding to launch a new title, either

using his own initiative or under orders from publisher Martin Goodman, Lee would assign a creative

team to the project. Lee would check the comic at multiple phases in its production, ensuring that the

work met with his approval. Such checks would take place after an issue's initial pencils had been

completed and after it had been lettered and inked. During the early '60s, most of Marvel's comics were

written either by Lee or by his brother Larry Lieber. As Marvel's new approach to superhero comics

proved a success and the company expanded its line, Lee began to hire new writers to help with the

workload. The addition of these writers added a step to the production process, as Lee checked each new

writer's dialogue.[21]

Lee's frequent checks on comics as they progressed through the production process was intended

not only to guarantee the quality of his subordinates' work but to ensure that it confirmed to Marvel's

house style. Thomas Schatz writes that one of the chief characteristics of the classic Hollywood studio

system was that each studio's output generally conformed to a distinct house style, a style defined by the

central producer.[22] Warner Bros., for instance, was defined by grittiness and social relevance while MGM

thrived on opulent, sophisticated fare. Similarly, Lee oversaw the implementation of a Marvel house style

in the early 1960s. Unlike the house styles of the classical studios, Marvel's style was defined by the

distinctive artistic approach of two specific creators, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. From 1961 until the early

'70s, the Marvel house style featured Kirby's powerful, dynamic penciling and Lee's snappy, hyperbolic

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[20] Jones 297

[21] Mark Seifert, "The Roy Thomas Deposition For the Kirby Family Vs Marvel Lawsuit," *BleedingCool*, 9 March 2011, https://www.bleedingcool.com/2011/03/09/the-roy-thomas-deposition-for-the-kirby-family-vs-marvel-lawsuit/

[22] Schatz

prose. These elements combined to tell stories of superheroes plagued by everyday problems, mixing fantastic adventures with believable relationships and relatable emotions.

In the early '60s the emergence of this style was due primarily to the fact that Lee and Kirby provided the art and dialogue for most of the comic books released by the small publisher. As Marvel's success caused the company's creative staff to grow and its reliance on freelancers to increase, Lee took specific steps to ensure that all of the publisher's titles conformed to the Marvel style. He tasked Kirby with teaching new artists to reproduce his art style and would occasionally ask him to layout pages for other pencillers, filling panels with rough shapes that an issue's credited artist could trace and develop. If Lee was unhappy with a portion of an artist's work or if he felt a sequence needed to be particularly dynamic, he ordered Kirby to pencil the relevant pages. As he set out to hire new writers, Lee looked for young fans who could replicate his own unique style of patter. In a 1966 article in *The Cleveland Press*, reporter Don Thompson explained the importance of ensuring that new writers could conform to the Marvel Manner: "the success of the comics depends on maintaining the Lee style of writing."[23]

The Marvel house style did not entirely prohibit creative experimentation and stylistic variation. Henry Jenkins has invoked David Bordwell's concept of "the bounds of difference" as a way to understand the degree to which artistic innovation is allowed within the standardized creative process found in the comic industry. Jenkins explains that such systems are defined by artistic norms that can be bent to a certain degree but which, upon reaching the bounds of difference, become rigid and prevent further deviation from the established house style. In this way, creative industries are able to integrate and adapt to new artistic developments while retaining an overall creative approach that has proven

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[23] Don Thompson, "Comic Books For College Mart," *The Cleveland Press*, 3 Jan. 1966

financially successful.[24] It fell to Lee to ensure that Marvel's stylistic bounds proved neither too flexible nor too rigid.

Jim Steranko's time at Marvel illustrated Lee's careful cultivation of the company's bounds of difference. The 28-year-old Steranko joined Marvel in 1966, after Kirby's artistic approach had been enshrined as the publisher's house style. The young artist earned a job by proving he could conform to this style, penciling over pages of art work which Kirby had laid out. By 1967, Steranko had become penciler, inker, colorist, and writer of the "Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D." feature in *Strange Tales*. His position at Marvel was unique – it was extremely rare for a single artist to fulfill even two of those roles on a single book, let alone all four. Steranko began experimenting with the comic form, obliterating panel boundaries, composing single- and double-page spreads, and creating images that crossed into the psychedelic. Lee was often uncomfortable with Steranko's stylistic innovation but ultimately allowed the young artist to push at the established boundaries of superhero comic art. In 1969, however, Lee and Steranko clashed over the writing of a horror story set to be published in *Tower of Horror* #1. Lee insisted that the story's title and some of its dialogue be altered before he would approve its publication. Steranko balked at the editorial interference and Lee fired him.[25] Steranko's experience at Marvel not only demonstrated Lee's careful regulation of Marvel's house style but also the degree to which artistic experimentation within that style was vital to the continued appeal of Marvel's product. As Roy Thomas, Lee's assistant, protégé, and successor as Editor-in-Chief explained, "I think Jim's legacy to Marvel was demonstrating that there were ways in which the Kirby style could be mutated."[26]

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[24] Henry Jenkins, "Man Without Fear," <u>Make Mine Marvel</u>, ed. Matt Yockey, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017) pg. 70: David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, <u>The Classical Hollywood System</u>, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pg. 70

[25] Jason Strykowski, "SDCC: Steranko Discusses Working with Stan Lee, Slapping Bob Kane," *Comic Book Resources*, 6 Aug. 2014, https://www.cbr.com/sdcc-steranko-discusses-working-with-stan-lee-slapping-bob-kane/

[26] Jim Amash*,* "'Roy the Boy' In the Marvel Age of Comics," *Alter Ego* 50, July 2005, pg. 23

By the end of the '60s, the dominance of Kirby's style at Marvel had begun to diminish, in part due to the innovation of artists like Steranko. In the '70s, the publisher's house style would come to be defined not by Kirby but by the artwork of John Romita Sr. and Sal Buscema. The influence of Lee's corny, quippy dialogue would persist for another decade before being replaced by a more naturalistic style of speech. The one element of Marvel's house style that has remained constant to this day is their depiction of superhero characters as relatable human, beset by familiar problems and locked in changing, imperfect relationship. It is Lee's association with this element of superhero storytelling that is the cornerstone of his role as author figure of the Marvel Universe and the various transmedia manifestations of that storyworld.

Comic Book Authors

Despite the industrial, collaborative reality of comic book production, the lure of the romantic ideal of authorship is powerful, and a wide range of comic creators, including both Lee and Kirby, have attempted to position themselves as a sole, creative genius – a comic book auteur. Auterism, which arose in France in the 1950s and played a key part in '60s and '70s Hollywood, proved a remarkably appealing way of viewing film because it elevated not merely individual filmmakers but film as a whole; the definition and celebration of a romantic author is an integral tool for an art form seeking to elevate its cultural standing. In the '50s, A collection of critics and filmmakers associated with the journal *Cahiers du Cinema* sought to forge the film director into a romantic author, the solitary source of a film's unity and, thus, its value. Scouring the product of classical Hollywood, they identified individuals like Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford who could be reimagined as romantic figures, in the process dismissing the artistic contributions of cinematographers, composers, writers, stars, and other creative personnel who were depicted as little more than elements of the "dehumanizing, formulaic, profit-hungry machinery of

Hollywood's studio factories."[27] Even as he publicized his colleagues and thrived in a collaborative creative environment, Lee attempted to position himself as the auteur of the Marvel universe in its entirety. Lee's desire for recognition as a romantic genius was most fully articulated in his early '70s collaborations with filmmaker Alain Resnais, a member of the French New Wave that had been integral in defining the concept of the auteur. Lee was not alone in his efforts for individual recognition in the face of the comic industry's factory-like reality. Auterism exerted a powerful influence on many comic creators after it was brought to America in the 1960s, and in the '90s it played a key part in events which drove Marvel into bankruptcy.

To fully understand the role Lee forged for himself at Marvel and the importance of his appearances in the MCU, we must turn not to the ideal of romantic authorship but to Foucault's concept of the author figure. In 1969, Michel Foucault gave a lecture entitled "What is an Author?," a response to an essay written by Roland Barthes two years earlier. Barthes' polemic had declared the death of the author, and while Foucault shared the desire to lay the tyrant to rest, his lecture was more concerned with how the author functioned as an element of discourse. Foucault introduced the concept of the "author-function" separate from the actual, historical reality of the individual or group who produced any particular work or body of works. The discursive construct of the author function works in several ways. It "permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts." The author-function describes and binds texts into an oeuvre – or franchise – and also creates a border, marking some texts as outside the acknowledged body of work. The name of the author also authorizes a text. Foucault explains that, prior to the 18th century, literature was most often published anonymously while scientific and medical tracts required the mark of their author to "be received as statements of demonstrated truth. In the 1700s, this state of affairs was reversed, as "literary discourses came to be accepted only when

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[27] Schatz

endowed with the author function." Foucault's author-function also "serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts."[28]

Marvel Studio's industrialized filmmaking process, which has diminished the authorial presence of a films' writers, directors, and stars, relies upon Lee to perform the tasks associated with the author function. His cameos play a vital role in defining the borders of what should be considered a "Marvel film," a particularly important function because several different studios are producing films based on the publisher's IPs and Marvel's creative control over these various franchises differs dramatically. Lee's presence also serves to assure audiences that a film will be faithful to the source material and to mediate and justify any deviation from the original comics.

Stan "the Man"

This dissertation focuses its exploration of the comic industry's interaction with other media industries through the figure of one of the world's most iconic comic creators, Stan Lee. Lee's unique position in the comic industry and his relationship with other media industries make him a useful lens through which to explore the relationship between comic, film, and television production history. Though he has been a part of the comic book industry almost from the moment of its inception in the early '30s, Lee's fame rests primarily on an eleven-year period, from 1961 to 1972, during which, as Marvel's editor and chief writer, he and a host of collaborators revitalized superhero comics and created a fictional universe that is currently the basis for a wildly successful transmedia empire. Despite this prolific burst of creativity, Stan Lee has spent most of his professional life not as a comic creator but as a liaison

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[28] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" <u>Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology</u>, ed. James D. Faubion, (New York: The New Press, 1998)

between Marvel comics and Hollywood, trying – and failing – to bring the company's intellectual properties to the screen or to leverage his connection with Marvel into the opportunity to create original film and television franchises. He has taken part in the creative processes involved in the production of comics books, animated television, live television, and comic strips, and his experience highlights the relationship between these diverse artistic formations.

In addition to being the world's most famous comic creator, Lee is also one of the most controversial. Lee is the focal point of an ongoing debate over the nature of comic creation, the role of authorship in that process, and the ownership of the product of comic creator's artistic labor. He occupies a unique position in comic history, having served simultaneously as both editor and writer and embodying both an industrial and romantic vision of authorship. Over the course of his career he would routinely swap perspectives to suit whatever point he was currently trying to make, siding with management or labor as it proved expedient. The struggle between romantic and collaborative modes of authorship was also an internal one for Lee, as he was eager to be recognized as a culturally respectable artistic genius while being inclined by temperament and talent to a more collaborative mode of production. It is not my goal in this dissertation to take a stance in the debate over the creation of the Marvel universe, to endorse the claims made by Stan Lee or Jack Kirby or Steve Ditko or any of the other individuals who have involved themselves in the discussion. Instead, I use the issue as a means to further explore broader issues of authorship.

Most importantly, Lee's professional journey elegantly embodies the movement of production methods associated with the creation of fictional universes from the margins to the center of American popular culture. Lee spent much of the 20th century as a creator in a disdained field of cultural production desperately seeking recognition before ascending, in the late 2000s, to act as the personification of the author function for one of the world's most successful transmedia franchises. Lee himself is a singularly malleable figure. From his earliest days at Timely Comics, one of Lee's greatest strengths was his adaptability. Goodman's comics were not known for their originality – instead, they were widely

regarded as a derivative industry's most derivative publications. Goodman would spot a pop culture trend and assign his comic creators to flood the market with cheap, imitative fair. It was a task at which Lee excelled, and he proved capable of churning out westerns, romances, sci-fi, horror, and funny animal books. Though he would spend decades mythologizing the creation of the Marvel universe as the one moment in which he asserted a personal artistic vision, his creative adaptability would remain one of his primary traits. Lee would frequently admit as much himself, citing his adaptability as the aspect of his personality that allowed him to survive continual disappointment in bringing Marvel's properties to other media. This adaptability makes Lee a useful figure through whom to chart shifts in various media industries and the broader cultural developments that occasion these shifts.

Sources and Literature

Despite his high public profile and the overwhelming shadow he casts over the comic industry and fan community, surprisingly few scholars have paid much attention to Stan Lee. The most thorough overviews of Lee's life have come from mainstream and, particularly, comic industry journalists. This presents the scholar researching Lee with a problem, as it can often be difficult to distinguish between fact and legend in such accounts. As Gerard Jones, author of the excellent *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book* (2003) puts it, one of the challenges of writing about comics is "to dig through the tall tales, drunken misunderstandings, and self-protective fudgings that have shaped the accepted history of this oddest of American art forms."[29] This difficulty is only compounded in the case of Lee, who has spent his entire life embellishing and mythologizing his own career, and who remains a deeply controversial figure within comic fandom. Accounts of Lee's life tend to pick a side in

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[29] Jones

the long running debate over whether Stan Lee or Jack Kirby deserves the lion's share of the credit for birthing the Marvel universe. Journalist Ronin Ro, for instance, tends to support Kirby's version of events in his *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution* (2004). The most impartial account of Lee's career can be found in Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon's *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book* (2004). Journalist Raphael and comic historian Spurgeon maintain a hearty skepticism regarding accounts of Lee's life and have produced a strong, general biography of the man.

One of the most unique aspects of the comic industry is the frequency with which individuals move from the major publishers to the fan press and vice versa. Roy Thomas, who served as Marvel's Editor-in-Chief from 1972 to 1974 and has written extensively for both Marvel and DC, got his start in the early '60s as creator of the fanzine *Alter Ego.* In 1999, after his retirement from the comic industry, he partnered with TwoMorrows Publishing to revive that magazine and act as its editor. TwoMorrows also publishes *Back Issue!,* edited by veteran comic writer Michael Eury. These journals are a useful resource, full of interviews with and articles by artists and writers from various eras in the history of comic publishing. TwoMorrows also publishes books, including the encyclopedic *American Comic Book Chronicles,* which are similarly filled with information provided by industry insiders. The caveat regarding these sources, of course, is that the members of the comic industry who are integral in their composition make no pretense of impartiality.

Lee's own words, taken with a grain of salt, have also proved invaluable to the composition of this study. I have perused a wide variety of media outlets, both those intended for a general audience and those aimed at comic fans, to find the many interviews Lee has given over the years. Two collections of Lee interviews are available. The first is *Stan Lee: Conversations* (2007), released by the University Press of Missisippi and edited by Jeff McLaughlin. The second, *The Stan Lee Universe* (2011), is another product of TwoMorrows Press and is edited by Roy Thomas and former Marvel editor Danny Fingeroth. Many of Lee's opinion pieces from the pages of Marvel comics, published as "Stan's Soapbox," have

been collected in *Stan's Soapbox: The Collection* (2008). Lee has also written an autobiography, *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee* (2002), which is little more than a string of largely unrelated anecdotes and of less usefulness in understanding Lee than the many interviews he has given over the years.

This study draws heavily on Stan Lee's personal papers, held at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming. Lee spent much of his life writing proposals, outlines, bibles, and script excerpts for projects which would never reach fruition but illustrate the changing contours of his efforts to adapt Marvel's heroes to other media. When available, I have also sought out scripts and production documents pertaining to unrealized comic adaptations not included among the Lee material. In addition, Lee's papers also contain a range of correspondence, unpublished articles, and press clippings he deemed significant enough to save. The American Heritage Center also stores the papers of William Dozier and Douglas Cramer, producers involved in creating the 1966 *Batman* and 1975 *Wonder Woman* programs. I have also examined documents housed at the University of Minnesota related to the Child Study Association of America's involvement in the long-running Superman radio program.

Lee also figures heavily in a number of more generalized overviews of the comic industry. One of the best of these is Sean Howe's *Marvel: The Untold Story* (2012). Howe's general, journalistic account of the history of Marvel Comics offers a portrait of Lee's development through the years, from office assistant to Hollywood liaison. Along with the work of Raphael and Spurgeon, Howe's book has provided vital background information as I delved more deeply into issues of comic media authorship and the comic industry's cross-media efforts. Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow* offers a thorough, well written account of the rise of the comic industry in the '30s and '40s which encompasses the early days of Lee's career at Marvel. Jones work is particularly useful in understanding the degree to which the comic industry was viewed as a marginal, disreputable field for the first several decades of its existence.

As Marvel's influence on American culture becomes more clear thanks to the remarkable success of Marvel-based movies, scholars are beginning to turn their attention towards Lee. Dru Jeffries, in the

article "Spotting Stan" featured in the collection *Make Mine Marvel* (2017), explores Lee's cameos in Marvel-based films by comparing these appearances to Hitchcock's frequent cameos in the films he directed. Jeffries chapter is eloquent and insightful, but my own conclusions regarding the significance of Lee's cameos differ significantly. Jeffries views Lee as a "puppet," manipulated by directors and studio executives: his cameos are thus playful acknowledgements of his powerlessness and obsolescence.[30] As this study will make clear, I view those cameos as the culmination of Lee's decades of self-mytholigizing, moments which present him as the ultimate author figure of Marvel's comics and all the cross-media products that have emerged from them.

Prior to the 21st century only a few scholars had explored films or television series based on comic books. One of the earliest scholarly works to consider comic book adaptations in other media was *The Many Lives of the Batman*, edited by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio and published in 1991. This seminal collection of essays considers the *Batman* series of the mid-60s and 1989's blockbuster film *Batman.* Of particular note in this collection is Eileen Meehan's "'Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!': The Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext." Though it predates the pop culture dominance of superhero cinema by almost two decades, Meehan's examination of the corporate and economic context surrounding the release of 1989's *Batman* and its exploitation across multiple media delivery systems is necessary reading to fully understand how and why superheroes have come to dominate popular culture. While it does not deal with a comic book franchise, Kristin Thompson's *The Frodo Franchise* (2007) also informs my understanding of how serialized storyworld-focused franchises are shaped and exploited across multiple media. A journalistic work, Jake Rossen's 2008 *Superman vs. Hollywood,* has also proven particularly valuable to this study in understanding the cross-media history of the comic industry prior to Marvel's new approach to the superhero genre in 1961.

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[30] Dru Jeffries, "Spotting Stan," <u>Make Ours Marvel</u>, ed. Matt Yockey, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017)

The work of Derek Johnson is also useful to understanding cross-media adaptations. Johnson has developed an increasingly sophisticated view of franchising across several essays and a book concerned in whole or in part with Marvel's attempts to bring the X-Men to television, film, and video games. *Film and Comic Books,* released in 2007 and edited by Ian Gordon, featured Johnson's "Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?" He followed this with "Franchise Histories: Marvel, *X-Men,* and the negotiated process of Expansion" in *Convergence Media History* (2009). Johnson's work with the X-Men finally became a vital section of his *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (2013), which situates it as part of a larger examination of the phenomenon of franchising.   Johnson understands the formation and operation of cross-media partnerships as a process of "imperfect negotiation" between stakeholders in very different industrial, economic and cultural contexts which often leads to "uneven experimentation, challenge, and failure."[31] This view of the process of cross-media adaptation is particularly useful for this study, which is just as frequently concerned with failed partnerships between the comic and film and television industry as it is with successful ones.

This study attempts to place cross-media adaptations, whether failed or successful, in the context of broader social and cultural shifts. As such, it has been heavily influenced by the growing number of works by scholars who bring a cultural studies perspective to an examination of superhero comic books. Key texts in this category include Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation* (2001) and Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *Of Comics and Men* (2009), translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, both of which present thorough cultural history of the comic medium. Gabbilliet's focus on the cultural standing of comic books has informed this study's exploration of how issues of respectability interacted with Stan Lee's view of authorship. In a similar vein, *The Amazing Tranforming Superhero!* (2007), edited by Terrence

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[31] Derek Johnson, "Franchise Histories," <u>Convergence Media History</u>, eds. Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake (New York: New York University Press, 2013) pg 15

R. Wandtke, presents a collection of essays which conceive of the history of popular superheroes as a series of revisions affected by broader social and cultural developments. Ramzi Fawaz's wonderful *The New Mutants* (2016) embraces liberal and even radical readings of post-war superheroes, arguing that despite their nationalistic roots, in the second half of the 20th century superhero comics became a popular fantasy of tolerance and inclusivity. One growing focus of cultural studies comic book scholarship is concerned with the experiences of African-American creators and the way African-American readers have made use of comic books. While some scholars, such as Frances Gateward and John Jennings, argue that "the genre of the superhero is very much a white-male-dominated power fantasy,"[32] others like Adilifu Nama work to reclaim and "critically celebrate" the figure of the mainstream black superhero.[33] Works in this field include Nama's *Super Black* (2011), Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and their Fans* (2000), and *The Blacker the Ink* (2015) edited by Gateward and Jennings. The mid-50s crusade against comic books and its immediate aftermath have been a particular focus of cultural historians. Studies concerned with this period include James Gilbert's *Cycle of Outrage* (1988), Steven Starker's *Evil Influences* (1989), Amy Kiste Nyberg's *Seal of Approval* (1998), Bart Beaty's *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (2005), and David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague* (2009).

Over the last two years Marvel Studio's remarkable success has excited a flurry of scholarly interest in comic books and comic book cinema. Academic presses across the world, particularly at Rutgers and the University of Mississippi, have begun publishing a range of texts examining the comic book and its related media from a wide range of scholarly perspectives. This study is my own small attempt to contribute to this exciting and rapidly growing body of scholarship.

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[32] Frances Gateward and John Jennings, "Introduction: The Sweeter the Christmas," The Blacker the Ink, eds. Frances Gateward and John Jennings (New Brunswick: Rutger's University Press, 2015)

[33] Adilifu Nama, Super Black, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) pg 5

Throughout this study, I alternate between referring to Marvel's production process as collaborative and industrial. Both of these terms apply to the creative environment at the comic publisher, but both carry the risk of misinterpretation. The term industrial carries connotations of the mid-century critique of mass culture, a school of thought that dehumanized pop culture creators like Lee and his colleagues. This critique permeated the zeitgeist for many years, influencing the attitudes not merely of intellectuals but of television and film producers. It was this sense of the comic creator as a faceless cog that Lee was partially reacting against as he sought to publicize the identity of his colleagues and to assert his own authorial voice throughout the '60s. Additionally, as noted above, Marvel's unique creative process was less rigidly factory-like than that of the publisher's competitors. Nevertheless, Marvel's production method was undoubtedly industrial. It was also collaborative, but this term risks giving the impression of a much looser system of artistic cooperation, with the terms of interaction defined by the participants rather than imposed from above. Though neither word is ideal, both highlight key elements of Marvel's system of authorship.

I attempt to distinguish between cross-media and transmedia creativity. Transmedia refers to a narrative that is stretched across multiple episodes featured in various types of media. Such storylines are often part of a larger narrative universe. Cross-media is a more traditional form of adaptation, in which a character, storyline, or even a narrative universe based in one medium is translated, often with significant changes, to another medium. In cross-media adaptations, these two narrative iterations remain distinct from one another. The line between transmedia and cross-media phenomena is often blurry and indistinct.

I use the term Marvel Revolution to describe the shift in creative philosophies that became public with the debut of *The Fantastic Four* and rapidly filled Marvel's publishing line with "realistic" super-

heroes, subsequently influencing the entire comic industry. I use the term Marvel Age to describe the period from the debut of Fantastic Four in 1961 to Lee's retirement as Marvel's Editor-in-Chief in 1972.[34] Both of these terms were popularized within the comic community by Lee himself, who began to use them in the early '60s, plastering them on comic covers and relying on them in promotional materials. They tend to overemphasize Marvel's and Lee's impact on the field – superheroes had begun to return to comics in 1956 when DC editor Julius Schwartz revived moribund hero The Flash, and many of the techniques Lee popularized had been experimented with by other creative teams, notably at EC in the early '50s. In addition, the use of these terms risks corroborating Lee's self-aggrandizing tales of the creative changes of the early '60s, which he depicted as intentionally revolutionary and immediately recognized as significant. Still, the terms are in wide use in comic fandom and do designate moments of genuine and significant creative, corporate, and cultural change within the comic industry.

To describe the overarching narrative setting in which all of the action of a single franchise is set, I alternate between the terms storyworld, storyverse, and narrative universe. Within these universes, storylines tend to be presented as serials rather then series. In serials, each narrative installment is a chapter in a larger whole, with key storylines left open to inspire continued reader interest. Series, on the other hand, present contained narratives in which all major storylines reach a satisfying conclusion. Subsequent episodes in a series depict additional, self-contained narratives, usually featuring the same group of characters.

This study also relies on terms that may be unfamiliar to non-comic fans, such as crossovers and event series. Normally, each individual superhero or superhero team controlled by a comic publisher

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[34] The phrase appears on the cover of *Fantastic Four* #17, cover-dated August 1973, but seems to have originated earlier than that in the fan community

appears in their own series, known as a solo book, which is published monthly.[35] More popular characters like Spider-Man or Batman may appear in several solo books each month. During a crossover, the star of one solo book appears as a guest in another character's solo book. These crossovers may be as simple as Spider-Man visiting the Fantastic Four in pursuit of a job, as in *Amazing Spider-Man* #1. Crossovers allow publishers to use more popular characters to boost the popularity of lower selling solo books. Beginning in the mid-80s, crossovers became a major component of a proliferating number of events. In the comic industry, events are major storylines, often causing substantial changes to a narrative universe's status quo, that become the focus of a publisher's marketing efforts for several months. These events almost always involve characters from many different solo books cooperating or fighting and as such may also be known as crossover events. Events may take on a number of narrative shapes: they may be featured in their own, dedicated mini-series; they may be told across dedicated issues of several different character's solo books; or they may involve some combination of those approaches, such as when solo books are used to tell side stories emerging from and pertaining to the primary event series. In the late-80s and '90s DC and Marvel's events became so sprawling and exerted such a disruptive influence on all of the publishers' solo books that I refer to the phenomenon as mega-events.

<u>Chapters</u>

This study is divided into three sections, each of which feature multiple chapters. The first section explores a period stretching from 1961 to 1972 during which, as Marvel's Editor-in-Chief and

principle writer, Lee simultaneously instituted a new industrial mode of comic creation at Marvel, began to publicize the contributions of his collaborators in that process, and worked to define and assert his own authorial voice. Chapter 1 offers an overview of this period. In the early '60s, comics and their creators were viewed as little more than interchangeable, talentless drudges, a sentiment which found its most eloquent expression in the mass culture critique that had originated from the Frankfurt School. Lee reacted against this perception by crediting and ballyhooing all of Marvel's creators, including himself. As Marvel's new approach to superheroes proved popular, Lee used media interviews and college lecture tours to assert and refine an authorial presence that ultimately obscured the industrial reality of the comic industry. The second chapter in this section focuses on one of the most surprising periods of Lee's life, his artistic partnership with Alain Resnais in the early '70s. Lee's collaboration with Resnais allows us to consider the Marvel Revolution in the context of other artistic revolutions occurring during the same period and to observe the concerns with authorship and cultural respectability that united them. Lee's work with Resnais also resulted in a script, *The Monster Makers*, which still stands as he most extensive rumination on the issue of authorship. Finally, this chapter attempts to understand how Lee's reliance on the narrative tools of character-based realism and social relevance furthered his desire to raise both his own cultural standing and that of the comic industry as a whole.

The second section of this study discusses the beginning of Marvel's cross-media efforts as the publisher attempts to bring its characters to television during the '60s and '70s. To a considerable extent, Marvel's cross-media fortunes rested on the success of two hit series based on characters owned by rival DC, *Batman* (1966-1968) and *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979). The success of these two series was itself the product of larger cultural developments. Chapter 3 explores the Pop moment of the mid-60s, a period during which distinctions between high-, low-, and middlebrow culture seemed to weaken. This period saw the first adaptation of the heroes Lee had helped develop to another medium as Marvel's pantheon appeared in several cartoon series. The promise the Pop moment seemed to offer comic creators proved false, as both Pop Art and *Batman* served to reinforce derogatory attitudes towards comic books and the

proliferation of superhero cartoons excited a furious backlash of citizens and litigators concerned with the state of children's television. By decade's end, the comic industry and the television and film industry had begun to have very different understandings of the audience for comic book-based media, a discrepancy which would inhibit Lee's efforts to bring Marvel's characters to other media.

Chapter 4 investigates a fascinating period in the '70s during which the women's movement profoundly influenced the actions of the comic industry and its cross-media efforts. The defining superhero of this era was Wonder Woman, a character whose unique feminist undertones were the product of her creator William Moulton Marston's place outside of the comic industry's standardized creative process. After Marston's death, both the comic and television industries struggled to integrate the character into their system of production with very mixed success. In the '70s, liberal feminists led by Gloria Steinem adopted and reshaped the Amazon warrior. It was this figure, an icon of the women's movement, who interested the producers of the late '70s *Wonder Woman* series. *Wonder Woman'*s success was a rare bright spot for a comic industry that spent most of the decade in crisis, causing Stan Lee and Marvel's other creators to scramble to produce new female heroes, a process that revealed the limits of the publisher's male dominated industrialized creative process. Ultimately, Marvel's new female heroes were as heavily influenced by Stan Lee's cross-media efforts as they were by the feminist movement.

The final section focuses on Marvel's interaction with the film industry from the '80s to the present. In the 1980s, film producers began to seriously consider the possibilities of comic book-based material for the first time. A wide range of forces, including the development of new media delivery systems and changing attitudes to genre fare, convinced Hollywood to entertain the idea of making superhero movies. The changes taking place in Hollywood laid the groundwork for Marvel to eventually become one of the dominant forces in American popular culture. As chapter 5 discusses, this bright future remained distant as Lee attempted to interest studios in Marvel's properties in the 1980s. Marvel found itself consigned to the margins of the film industry, making deals with the new independent studios

which had emerged to feed the growing ancillary markets. As these studios collapsed at the end of the decade, Lee would watch as the characters he had co-created became hopelessly entangled in lawsuits and red tape.

Chapter 6 sees Marvel's fortunes reach a nadir. Despite film producers' growing appetite for superhero films, Marvel's new owner Ronald Perelman eschewed Hollywood deal making and instead tried to leverage the company's IPs in other, ultimately disastrous ways. In the same period, an auteurist movement within the comic industry which had begun in the '60s reached disastrous heights, clashing with a competing trend that saw editors attempt to diminish the importance of creators by focusing fan attention on the characters themselves. Meanwhile, new attitudes towards writers and editors within the comic fan community conspired to recast Lee, not as the beloved author of the Marvel universe, but as a duplicitous executive who worked to steal credit from Marvel's real genius, Jack Kirby. The turmoil within Marvel eventually drove the publisher into bankruptcy, though by the decade's end new ownership at Marvel made the publisher's Hollywood future look a little brighter.

The final chapter of this study discusses how Marvel Studios changed the way Hollywood makes movies. In the early 2000s a spate of hit superhero movies convinced Marvel to begin making their own movies rather than licensing their properties to other studios. To do this, producer Kevin Feige instituted a collaborative creative process that bears striking similarities to the classical Hollywood studio system and to the Mighty Marvel Method Lee designed in the early '60s. This system, which is widely emulated throughout Hollywood, decreases the importance of traditional sources of film authorship such as directors, stars, and writers. As traditional sources of authorship are destabilized, studios attempt to find new ways to fill the discursive role of the Foucauldian author function. It is a role Stan Lee had been preparing for his entire life. Marvel Studios uses Lee's cameos to position him as the MCU's author function, the avuncular face obscuring an industrialized creative process.

Section 1

Chapter 1

Lee's Voice and the Comic Factory

In 1961, writer/editor Stan Lee, artist Jack Kirby, and several other freelance artists collaborated to produce *Fantastic Four* #1. The next several years at Marvel were a period of remarkable pop culture artistry during which Lee and his collaborators crafted a rich, expansive fictional universe containing hundreds of costumed adventurers. The Marvel universe was founded on a new approach to the superhero genre, one that depicted its fantastical adventurers as realistically human, struggling with familiar flaws and relatable problems. The changes introduced in *Fantastic Four* #1 inaugurated what comic fans called the Marvel Revolution, a moment of artistic innovation that would alter the entire comic industry and lay the groundwork for Marvel to become one of the dominant forces in 21st century popular culture. As part of this Revolution, Marvel's chief writer and Editor-in-Chief Stan Lee implemented changes in the way comic books were authored and in how comic creators were credited. In the process, he began to position himself as a Foucauldian author figure for a fictional universe produced via an industrialized creative process, a role he would assume on a much larger scale after the 21st century rise of Marvel Studios.

In the middle of the 20th century, individuals like Lee and Kirby, laboring in a mass medium, were seen by much of the upper- and middle-class American population as little better than cogs in a machine. The Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture, articulated in the 1940s, had become widespread among American intellectuals in the '50s, filtering into the understanding of high- and

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middlebrow Americans. The mass culture critique reinforced a longstanding distaste for the marginal medium of comic books and created an environment in which comic creators were dehumanized, their artistic abilities dismissed out of hand. In the mid-50s the public distaste for comic books had resulted in a movement, led by Frankfort School adherent Fredric Wertham, which nearly destroyed the comic industry.

Stan Lee had worked in the comic industry his entire life, but he was growing tired of laboring in a marginalized medium whose creators were viewed as little more than menial drudges. In the '60s Lee began the linked missions of raising the cultural standing of the comic book and promoting the creators who helped produce Marvel comics, popularizing his collaborators among a growing and increasingly loyal cadre of comic fans. But Lee was an ambitious man who had always coveted recognition as an author in the romantic tradition, and as he celebrated his collaborators he also worked to accentuate his own, authorial presence in the pages of Marvel's books. In the mid-60s, as Marvel became popular on college campuses and the media began to become interested in the publisher's books, Lee seized the opportunity to assert the cultural value of comics, in the process continuing to refine and assert his authorial voice. Over the course of the decade, Lee's desire for individual recognition would come into greater and greater conflict with the industrial reality of the comic industry's system of production, sowing discord among the creators responsible for the Marvel Revolution.

Stan Lee and the Battle of the Brows

In the decades following the Marvel Revolution, as Stan Lee basked in the glow of media attention, the comic creator gradually developed an origin story for himself that stressed his literary connections, pretensions, and abilities. Lee's authorial ambitions emerged early, as the future editor spent

his youth engrossed in the works of the greatest writer of them all: "Shakespeare… was my god."[36] Lee's love for fine writing was matched by considerable nascent authorial abilities, a fact revealed in a story he never tired of relating but which is now believed by most researchers to be entirely fictional:

> I was always pretty good at writing in school, however, and during high school days, The New York Herald Tribune had a contest called 'The Biggest News of the Week.' Students were invited to write essays on this topic and it happened that I won this contest three weeks running. The editor called me and asked me to stop entering the contest, and he said, 'by the way, if you haven't thought of what you want to do when you get out of high school, you'd better become a writer. You'd be pretty good at it.'[37]

After a stint with the WPA Federal Theatre, Lee found himself attracted to the Timely Comic Company by the quality of their publications, particularly Jack Kirby and Joe Simon's *Captain America*. Shortly after joining the publisher, Lee's early career was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II and the young man enlisted in the army. As Lee was always ready to point out, during his military service he was one of only nine men in the army classified as a playwright.[38]

Conveniently omitted from this oft-retold tale is the fact that Lee was the cousin of Timely publisher Martin Goodman's wife, and it was this familial relationship that drew him to the company. Goodman, like many early comic entrepreneurs, had started as the publisher of a range of pulp magazines. Goodman's focus was profit and his output was highly derivative, a tradition that his comic line would uphold for the first several decades of its existence. In 1939, with Goodman eager to latch on to the superhero trend started by Superman, the pulp publisher's company released its first comic book, the

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[36] Mike Bourne, "Stan Lee, The Marvel Bard," *Changes Magazine*, 15 April 1970, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[37] Hurd

[38] David Kraft, "Stan Lee," *FOOM* Vol. 1 Iss. 17, March 1977

portentously titled *Marvel Comics* #1. The book featured two new heroes, the incendiary android known as the Human Torch and a moist royal known as Prince Namor the Sub-Mariner. With this first book proved a success, Goodman expanded the line and dubbed it Timely Comics. Much of the line's material was created by veteran hands Joe Simon and Jack Kirby and in 1940, with the Nazi threat looming and patriotic heroes in vogue, the pair created a formidable new hero for Goodman, dubbing him Captain America. "Cap" was an instant success and created more work for the already overburdened Kirby and Simon. They requested that the publisher hire them an assistant, and Goodman obliged by sending them his relative Stanley Lieber. Lieber's family connections to Goodman were not unusual – most of Timely's staff members were related to the publisher.[39] Goodman's nepotistic practices allowed him to ensure employee loyalty in a competitive, sometimes cut-throat field.

Lieber entered an industry that occupied the fringes of respectable society despite its considerable popularity. A great number of comic creators entered the field not out of choice but because the doors of more conventionally respectable institutions such as ad agencies and magazines were barred to them due to their race, gender, or faith. Lee would never discuss the degree to which bigotry directed at his Jewish heritage had frustrated his authorial ambitions, but other comic creators such as *Mad Magazine*'s Al Jaffee were far more open about the conditions which prevailed in the early comic industry:

> I came into the comic business in 1940, prior to World War II, as far as America was concerned, and the United States still lived under terrible discrimination rules against Jews. Of course, against black people it was ten times worse. But my friends and I who were artists, we sat around trying to figure out if we could get into an advertising agency, and the discussion would be something like, 'Forget about it, forget about it, you can't go to Benton and Bowles, they'll never hire a Jew.' That kind of thing. Then, suddenly, this miracle happened: the comic book business,

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[39] Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon, <u>Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book</u>, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004)

which was in large part developed by Jewish people, opened up to us. And that's how and why, I think, most of the people like Kirby and Eisner, we all got into it.[40]

Lieber immediately became a minor cog in the collaborative process, primarily tasked with erasing the pencil lines after Kirby had finished inking a piece of art. Lieber was embarrassed by his association with comics, and longed to be a journalist or a novelist.[41] The young man was soon pushing for greater responsibility, and Simon presented him with a task that flattered his authorial ambitions: writing the two-page text pieces the comics included to qualify for special mailing rates. Lieber's first text piece, "Captain America Foils the Traitors Revenge," appeared in *Captain America Magazine* #3, cover dated May 1941. Its most significant contribution to comic history was the introduction of a new character, the writer "Stan Lee."

Lee's newly chosen name and the use he made of it illustrated a fundamental contradiction in the writer's attitude towards his profession. Lee wanted creative recognition, even if it came in the culturally marginal comic book industry. In an era when comic creators very rarely asked for or received billing on their work, the first comic with a Lee story, *Captain America Comics* #5's "Headline Hunter, Foreign Correspondent," opened with a flamboyant splash page proclaiming "story by Stan Lee." This billing established a precedent, and Lee received credit on most of his work, often when his collaborators did not.[42]

Yet any credit Lieber might earn went to his alter-ego, Stan Lee. Lee initially claimed he was adopting the nom de plume "for journalistic reasons,"[43] but later elaborated that he had hoped to protect his future literary reputation from the taint of being associated with the comic industry and its infantile

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[40] Fingeroth and Thomas 28

[41] Jones 202

[42] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 23

[43] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 21

readers: "we had been turning out comic magazines just like everybody else, thinking of them as being for young children. And one of the reasons I even called myself 'Stan Lee,'… was because I figured, 'This is just a temporary job, and one day I'll quit, and write some Great American Novels, and I'll use my real name then.'"[44] Even in his earliest days in the comic industry, Lee was torn between seeking recognition as a comic writer or escaping a field that held little promise of cultural recognition.

Lee was not alone in changing his name to avoid association with a form of cultural production disdained by the upper- and middle-class; the practice was widespread among writers and artists in the industry's early days. Such name changes reflected a truth that Lee himself has admitted, that in the earliest days of the comic industry creators themselves didn't respect the material they produced or the audience that consumed it.[45] In this, comic creators reflected the opinion of many members of the middle- and upper-class. When a 1941 promotion to editor enabled Lee and his young family to move into the upscale environs of Long Island's Hewlett Harbor, his wife Joan recalls the disdain of the neighbors: "They considered Stan as something of a lightweight inasmuch as he was writing these silly little magazines for little children."[46]

Lee's Hewlett Harbor neighbors were expressing a disdain for mass culture in general and illustrated storytelling in particular that had a rich history in American culture. Such attitudes stretched back at least as far as the 1840s. In an 1846 sonnet entitled "Illustrated Books and Newspapers," William Wordsworth lamented that, while,

Discourse was deemed Man's noblest attribute/

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[44] Neal Conan interview, WBAI-FM, 1968, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[45] "Stan Lee interview," *Comic Media News*, 8 Sept. 1976, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming: Jones

[46] Blake Bell, I Have to Live With This Guy, (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2002), pg 61

and written words the glory of his hand… Now prose and verse sunk into disrepute/

must lacquey a dumb Art that best can suit/

The taste of this once-intellectual Land. A backward movement surely have we here,/

From manhood, - back to childhood; for the age -/

Avaunt this vile abuse of pictured page![47]

Here, a century before the Lees took up residence at Hewlett Harbor, is the familiar association of illustrated storytelling with simple-minded readers trapped in a state of perpetual childhood.

As Lawrence Levine has demonstrated, in the early years of the 19th century all Americans, regardless of class, enjoyed a shared popular culture (as long as they were white and male).[48] In the middle years of the century, this culture shattered, split into two separate classes of entertainment which, In the final years of the 19th century, would come to be codified into a system of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" art. In the 1880s, the term "highbrow," steeped in implications of racial differentiation, came to be used to denote the refined and the intellectual. Twenty years later, its counterpart "lowbrow" entered the lexicon.[49] In the 1933 *Saturday Review* article "Message and Middlebrow," Margaret Widdemer applied the terms to the reading public, linking the term "lowbrow" to the "tabloid addict class."[50] Professor Ardis Cameron clarifies that this group also included those with "proclivities for cheap paperback novels—mysteries, romances, science fiction, westerns, and the mildly salacious novels alternately referred to as "sexy" or "sleazy"."[51] Widdemer wrote before the emergence of the first proper

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[47]Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, Arguing Comics, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), pg. vii

[48] Lawrence Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow, (Cambridge: First Harvard University Press, 1988)

[49] Joan Shelley Rubin, Making of Middlebrow Culture, (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pg. xii

[50] Margaret Widdemer, "Message and Middlebrow," *Saturday Review*, 18 Feb. 1933

[51] Ardis Chapman, "Introduction," Peyton Place, (Lebanon: Northeastern University Press, 1999)

comic books, but they would certainly fit into a category well-stocked with their fantastical, serialized predecessors. Indeed, in the years following their late '30s popularization, there was little disagreement among cultural critics that comics were a prime example of the lowbrow.

Intellectual disdain for popular mass culture was amplified considerably during the '40s and '50s. A scathing critique of mass culture emerged from the Frankfurt School, a bastion of refugee intellectuals who had fled the Nazis and encamped at Columbia University. The intellectuals of the Frankfurt School were deeply distressed by the apathy and even acclaim with which the proletariat had greeted the Right's surge to power in 1930s Europe. They found an explanation for this behavior in mass culture, in which they heard the sinister echoes of German wartime propaganda. In Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's landmark examination of the culture industry, the entirety of mass culture, from creator to consumer, offers only the illusion of free choice and individual agency. Dismissing an understanding of pop culture in which audiences freely choose from a variety of entertainment options and producers attempt to cater their output to the viewers' whims, the two intellectuals write, "We are closer to the facts if we explain these phenomena as inherent in the technical and personnel apparatus which, down to its last cog, itself forms part of the economic mechanism of selection." Focusing on the creators of mass culture, Horkheimer and Adorno liken them to the workers and tools on a car assembly line, producing work with only the "illusory" differences found "between the Chrysler range and General Motors products."[52]

The Frankfurt School critique thus deprived the artist working in a mass medium of creative agency. In the words of Herbert Gans, intellectuals like Horkheimer and Adorno saw popular entertainment as something produced by "a process in which the industry transforms the creator into a worker on a mass production assembly line, requiring him or her to give up the individual expression of

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[52] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2007)

his own skills and values."[53] The men and women who participate in the collaborative, industrial

processes that create comics, B-movies, sci-fi magazines and other marginal cultural products are

understood not as humans expressing their unique subjectivities but as components in a fundamentally

mechanical process. Frankfurt School intellectual Leo Lowenthal makes this idea explicit, explaining that

the production of mass culture lacks the transcendence necessary for acts of true artistic creation, being

instead, "mere repetition of given facts with the use of borrowed tools."[54] Lowenthal boldly states that

most sociologists and philosophers agree that one of the fundamental necessities for the production of

mass culture is, "the decline of the individual in the mechanical working processes of modern

civilization."[55]

Lowenthal's use of mechanical imagery to describe the production of cheap, serialized literature

and to dehumanize the creators who collaborate in producing it did not originate with the Frankfurt

School, although they did much to popularize it among mid-century American intellectuals. Such

depictions of popular media date back at least as far as the industrial revolution and the dime novels that

emerged from it. In 1892, Edward Bok, an editor from Ladies Home Journal, wrote, "of course we all

know that all kinds of factories exist in New York but until last week I never knew that the great

metropolis boasted of such a thing as a real and fully equipped literary factory…"[56] Michael Denning

explains that such a view was widespread, with critics viewing dime novel production "as an

extraordinary kind of industrial production."[57]

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[53] Herbert J. Gans, Popular Culture & High Culture, (New York: Basic Books, 1999)

[54] Leo Lowenthal, "Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture," Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, eds Bernard Rosenberg & David Manning White, (New York: Free Press, 1965), pg 50

[55] Lowenthal 55

[56] Michael Denning, Mechanic Accents, (London: Verso, 1998)

[57] Denning

Few intellectuals influenced by the Frankfurt School wielded greater influence than Dwight Macdonald, whose resounding condemnations of mass culture and the drudges who produced it reached a wide readership. In his 1957 "A Theory of Mass Culture," Macdonald levels an accusing finger at a range of "new media" developed by "Mass Culture" into which "the serious artist rarely ventures." These new purveyors of false consciousness included radio, the movies, detective stories, science fiction, television, and, of course, "comic books."[58] Macdonald anticipates the auteurists as he argues that collaborative creation could never produce a work of true artistry – or a true artist. He laments the disappearance of filmmakers like Griffith and Stroheim, men who "were artists, not specialists." Their claim to this title rested entirely on the fact that "they did everything themselves, dominated everything personally: the scenario, the actors, the camera work, and above all the cutting. Unity is essential in art; it cannot be achieved by a production line of specialists, however competent."[59] Macdonald dismisses the creators of mass culture as "technicians hired by businessmen."[60]

It is unsurprising that similarly dehumanizing descriptions of mass culture creators emerged from Fredric Wertham, the fiercest foe of the comic industry. The precise degree to which Wertham was influenced by the Frankfurt School is a matter of debate – scholar Bart Beaty goes so far as to argue that the writings of the school were the very underpinnings of all Wertham's beliefs.[61] Whether or not this is true, the School's critique of mass culture certainly echoed through his arguments. In 1954's *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham used familiarly industrial language as he argues, "the imagination expressed in comic books is mechanical rather than in any way creative." Like Lowenthal, Wertham sees the production of mass culture not as a process of artistic creation but merely as the ham-fisted combining of

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[58] Dwight Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, eds Bernard Rosenberg & David Manning White, (New York: Free Press, 1965) pg 59

[59] Macdonald 65

[60] Macdonald 65

[61] Bart Beaty, Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture, (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2005)

borrowed and stolen bits of other works. As evidence, he cites a comic in which a mad doctor "transplants a pair of bat's wings on to a tiger."[62] This rote combination of pre-existing elements is depicted as an example of the extent of the comic creator's imaginative ability.

The only silver lining for those like Lee laboring in a field of lowbrow cultural production was that if the lowbrow was disdained by intellectuals, the middlebrow was despised. Over the course of the '50s, intellectuals like Macdonald and Lowenthal identified a new threat, middlebrow culture, that seemed to offer a more substantive danger to the boundaries surrounding highbrow culture than lowbrow ever had. Highbrow intellectuals' new concern with middlebrow occasioned a partial reevaluation of mass culture and its creators. Mass culture was still trash, of course, but it knew its place, a place that was safely distant from the verdant fields of high culture. Middlebrow culture like book-of-the-month clubs and Norman Rockwell portraits sought to elevate the unenlightened, and in the process dumbed down high culture for mass consumption, further damaging the already porous defenses which held the barbarians at bay. In 1961's "Masscult and Midcult," Dwight Macdonald turned his rhetorical guns away from familiar mass culture targets. "Midcult" had, "the essential qualities of Masscult – the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity – but it decently covers them with a cultural fig leaf. In Masscult, the trick is plain – to please the crowd by any means. But Midcult has it both ways: it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them."[63] Here was the real enemy, a genuine threat that might corrupt High Culture from within. As long as mass culture made no pretenses of artistry, it could be left for the moment to fester beyond the bounds of respectability.

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[62] Fredric Wertham, Seduction of the Innocent, (New York: Reinhart & Company, 1954), pg. 32

[63] Dwight Macdonald, "Masscult and Midcult," Masscult & Midcult, (New York: New York Review, 2011) pg. 37

In his first book, the future guru of television Marshall McLuhan followed much the same thinking as Macdonald as he offered a backhanded celebration of the low as part of a larger project to demonize the middle. It is a mark of Stan Lee's desperation for cultural credibility and intellectual recognition that years later, after the Canadian professor had become the darling of the media, he would trumpet his role in McLuhan's 1951 *The Mechanical Bride* in the pages of Marvel Comics despite the writer's derogatory remarks.[64] In the book, McCluhan addresses an article written by the then largely unknown Stan Lee for *Writer's Digest* in which the young editor gave advice to writers hoping to enter the comic field. McLuhan used Lee's article to argue, "In the matter of intellectual quality there is little to choose between *Dare Devil Comics* and *Gone With the Wind…* just as in emotional pattern there is little or no difference between the 'middle-brow' and the 'low-brow.'" In words that might have emanated from Macdonald, McCluhan argues low-brow publications are less objectionable due to "their absence of pretentiousness, and the readers of this form of entertainment are altogether undeceived by it. They are never under the impression of having bought or read something with 'class.'" McLuhan proceeds to argue that media critics and denizens of the "little magazines" must engage seriously with the kind of literature Lee produces, for it is only by understanding "bad" art that they can truly understand the "good."[65]

The first serious book-length study of comic books, Jules Feiffer's 1965 *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, played a key role in the brief burst of interest in comic books in the middle of the '60s. Yet even in a book ostensibly intended to pay tribute to a much-maligned medium, Feiffer made no attempt to argue for comics as art, gleefully declaring the medium "junk" and celebrating it in terms that even Macdonald might have accepted. The chief virtue of the comic book was that it was not middle-class:

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[64] Stan Lee, "When Opens the Cocoon!" *Fantastic Four* No. 67, Marvel Comics, 1967

[65] Marshall McLuhan, <u>The Mechanical Bride</u>, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) pg. 151

Junk is a second-class citizen of the arts, a status of which we and it are constantly aware. There

are certain inherent privileges in second-class citizenship. Irresponsibility is one. Not being

taken seriously is another. Junk, like the drunk at the wedding, can get away with doing or saying

anything because, by its very appearance, it is already in disgrace. It has no one's respect to lose;

no image to endanger. Its values are the least middle-class of all the mass media. That's why it is

needed so.[66]

The rise of midcult had forced intellectuals like MacDonald to modify their view of mass culture

producers: they could retain some degree of their humanity so long as they remained content to toil away

on the lowest rung of the cultural ladder, producing their trash without pretension.

Not all illustrated storytelling suffered the same stigmatization. Though newspaper comics were

occasionally condemned or denigrated and, in the years preceding WWI, subjected to a concentrated

attack that saw outlets like the *Ladies' Home Journal* (1909) call them "A Crime Against Children," by

the late '20s they were enjoying a favorable reevaluation.[67] Gilbert Seldes hailed comics as uniquely

American and new, a break from an outmoded past.[68] Comic strips like *Little Nemo* and the

Katzenjammer Kids were seen as works of folk art, expressions of an authentic democratic impulse.

These strips were embraced by critics such as James Agee, Manny Farber, and Otis Ferguson in the same

spirit as the silent comedies of Charlie Chaplin.[69]

One of the primary reasons that newspaper strips were received so much more favorably than

their comic book counterpart is that they were understood as the product of a single artist rather than of

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[66] Jules Feiffer, The Great Comic Book Heroes, (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2003) pg. 12

[67] "A Crime Against American Children," *Ladies' Home Journal* Vol. 26 Iss. 2, Jan. 1909, pg. 5

[68] Gilbert Seldes. "The People and the Arts." Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, eds Bernard Rosenberg & David Manning White, (New York: Free Press, 1965), pg. 213

[69] Adam Gopnik, "Comics" High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture. Eds. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnick. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990) Pg 182

several creators working in collaboration. They were therefore capable of producing the "unity" which Macdonald sought (although he might never have admitted it). Comic creators were celebrated in tones that harkened back to the pre-war popular front and intellectuals' dreams of a democratized, uniquely American culture. Trade books such as Martin Sheridan's *Comics and Their Creators* (1942), Coulton Waugh's *The Comics* (1947), and Stephen Becker's *Comic Art in America* (1959) offered interested readers a glimpse of comic strip creators and their artistic process. Artists like George Herriman and Bud Fisher became recognizable and respectable public figures.

When comic books emerged in the 1930s, they were understood as something very different than their newspaper-based forbears. Comic historian John Wells describes the public perception of comic books as "the ugly stepchild of newspaper comic strips – at best, a simple-minded counterpart: at worst, an active threat to a child's mental development."[70] Comics were no longer part of the integrated whole of the newspaper; they now stood on their own, separated from other elements of cultural merit such as news and editorials and completely outside the control of concerned parents. As Adam Gopnik explains, comics were not part of the "larger experience of the newspaper" but were "something you had to walk into a store and buy; it had overtones, always, of the secretive, the menacing, and the faintly masturbatory."[71]

If comic strip artists were authentic authors born of the American folk, comic book artists were faceless, menacing outsiders peddling violence and sex to children. When cartoonists like *Pogo*'s Walt Kelly were summoned to vouch for the acceptability of their comic book brethren during Fredric Wertham's assault on the medium in the 1950s, they did so only with great trepidation. Carmen Infantino, an accomplished comic book artist and eventually Editor-in-Chief at DC, describes the mood at

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[70] John Wells, <u>American Comic Book Chronicles: 1960-1964</u>, (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Press, 2013), pg. 9

[71] Gopnik xi

the National Cartoonists Society during the 1950s: "The newspaper strip artists commanded the most respect. I think the advertising cartoonists and comic book artists were only allowed in because the club needed the dues money. Especially during and after the Congressional hearings, we were actually ashamed to tell people what we did for a living. Joe Orlando used to tell people he drew children's books."[72]

<div align="center">Rise of the Bullpen</div>

Although he had been elevated to the lofty role of Timely's Editor-in-Chief in 1941, Stan Lee was not satisfied with his career. By the late '50s, the comic industry – and Timely in particular – seemed more of a dead end than ever, and Lee was desperate to escape. As he explained years later, "I was always thinking that the good things I did would be done outside of comics. Because what the hell good can you do in comics? You know."[73] Like many of his colleagues, Lee turned to the development of newspaper strips as a potential avenue out of the world of comic books. For the first several decades of his career, Lee pitched a range of strip ideas. In 1957, working with his early collaborator, artist Joe Maneely, he created *Mrs. Lyons' Cubs*, a strip following the adventures of a group of playful Cub Scouts that was distributed by the *Chicago Sun-Times Syndicate*.[74] Maneely was one of the few close friends Lee made within the industry, and in later years he romanticized his former partner as a lost chance to escape from the world of comic books: "I think if he hadn't died, I would have eventually maybe quit

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[72] Amash and Nolen-Weathington 44

[73] Jay Maeder, "Stan Lee interview," *New York Daily News*, 1974, Barry's Pearls of Comic Book Wisdom, 30 July 2014, http://forbushman.blogspot.com/2014/07/jay-maeder-comics-interview-with-stan.html

[74] Throughout the '50s, Maneely was Lee's most frequent collaborator; his tragic death in a 1959 commuter train accident forced Lee to work with other artists, most notably Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko

Marvel and gone off with Joe and done other stuff."[75] Lee also found brief success with a comic focusing

of a mailman known as Willie Lumpkin and a strip known as *My Friend Irma*,[76] both of which he

produced with the collaboration of Dan DeCarlo, best known as the creator of Archie.[77] With artist Stan

Goldberg Lee developed several single-panel strips, including *Doc*, following the gentle adventures of a

family doctor, and a feature focusing on a woman of the evening known as *Lil Repute*. Inspired by the

success of the film *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), the pair also developed a strip starring

"John Doe: Mr. Everyman." Lee would eventually find success as a newspaper strip writer as co-creator

of the Spider-Man daily comic. The importance which Lee placed on the newspaper incarnation of

Marvel's most famous creation is illustrated by the fact that he still writes the strip today, 40 years after it

launched and 45 years after he stopped regularly writing any of Marvel's comic books. This newspaper

comic success would come only much later, of course, and in the early '60s Lee remained trapped at

Timely.

Lee's efforts to escape the comic industry did not change even in the early '60s, when the new

approach to comic book superheroes instituted by Lee and his collaborators began to show signs of

success. What did begin to change, however, was Lee's approach to publicizing the identities of the men

and women who produced Marvel's increasingly successful comics. One of the key differences between

comic strips and comic books, a difference that played a vital role in how outsiders viewed the two fields,

was the depth of the collaboration involved in their production. Comic strips were usually produced either

by individual artists or by two-man writer/artist teams, whereas comic books were the product of

potentially dozens of creators working in concert. Until the early 1960s, most of these comic book artists

and writers labored in anonymity. few creators asked for credit, and few publishers offered it. In his

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[75] Raphael and Spurgeon, 60

[76] Artist Jack Seidel also worked with Lee on *My Friend Irma*

[77] Fingeroth and Thomas, 31

efforts to build a loyal audience for Marvel's new approach to superhero comics, Stan Lee implemented a number of policies that changed this, publicizing his colleagues and the collaborative process of comic production in which they engaged.

Lee, of course, had never been shy about signing his work, and in the '60s he was one of the few creators in the comic business that was eager to see his collaborators credited as well. In early Marvel Age comics, each of a single book's multiple chapters was surreptitiously signed somewhere on its first page by Lee and Kirby. Beginning with *Fantastic Four* #9, each comic included a full, prominently displayed credits list, complete with letterer and inker.[78] By *Fantastic Four* #24 these credits had expanded to play a major part in each comic's opening splash panel, with Lee exercising his increasingly defined voice – and endearing his colleagues to readers – by packing the credit box with alliterative nicknames and goofy jokes. *Fantastic Four* #24, for instance, was credited as being, "lovingly written by Stan Lee: tenderly drawn by Jack Kirby: Heroically inked by Geo: [sic] Bell: neatly lettered by: S. Rosen"[79] A few earlier comic publishers, most notably EC, had provided extensive credits on their comics, but Lee's efforts surpassed even those of his fan-friendly predecessor.

In the July 1964 issue of Marvel comics, Lee took a further step towards publicizing the work of his artistic collaborators by introducing the "Bullpen Bulletins," a feature which appeared in every comic the publisher released. The bullpen – a shared office space where the (mostly male) staff worked and engaged in shenanigans – was, for the most part, a fiction. Such a space had existed at Marvel's Empire State Building offices in the late '40s, and Lee had loved the atmosphere dearly. The 1950 lay-offs had left the bullpen a bitter memory, however, and Lee revived it in the pages of Marvel comics to intensify fan loyalty to the line and its creators as well as to provide another space to ballyhoo his collaborators. In

[78] Stan Lee, "The End of the Fantastic Four!" *Fantastic Four*, No. 9, Marvel Comics, 1962

[79] Stan Lee, "The Infant Terrible!" *Fantastic Four*, No. 24, Marvel Comics, 1964.

the very first Bulletin, Lee crowed that inker "Jolly Joe Sinnott has rejoined our mighty Marvel team!"[80] The idea of crediting an inker – or expecting readers to care about one – would have seemed absurd at any other publisher. Lee not only publicized the contributions of such creators, he also frequently acknowledged their ability to exert a degree of artistic agency over the completed comics. Fans became familiar with the style of inkers as well as colorists and letterers and frequently singled out their individual contributions to particular issues. A fan letter from 1965 is typical: "Vince Colletta is showing increased maturity in his inking of late. Texture is what makes the difference – his fine shading is a thing of beauty."[81] Even letterers were celebrated – in one Spider-Man comic, Lee prefaced a lengthy fight sequence featuring large onomatopoeic words filling the panels by explaining, "and now, we promised Artie Simek we'd let him go wild with sound effects for a page or two, so here goes—"[82]

Lee would continue to implement initiatives to familiarize readers with Marvel's creators and create a sense of reader loyalty. One of the major selling points of the first *Marvel Annual*, released with a 1964 cover date, was a series of pictures of almost every employee and freelancer connected to the company. When Lee announced the Merry Marvel Marching Society, the publisher's official fan club, one of the initial giveaways was "a frankly fabulous 33 1/3 R.P.M. record with the actual voices of the bullpen gang clowning around and welcoming you to the good ol' M.M.M.S.!"[83]

In 1965, only a few months before the full scope of Marvel's success began to become clear, before the company seemed poised to become a media powerhouse and the issue of authorship came to involve millions of dollars and credit for creating one of the world's most prominent pop-culture

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[80] David Kasakove, "Finding Marvel's Voice," <u>Stan Lee Universe</u>, eds. Fingeroth and Thomas, (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2011) 132

[81] Stan Lee, "To Save You, Why Must I Kill You?" *Fantastic Four* No. 42, Marvel Comics, 1965

[82] Stan Lee, "The Molten Man Regrets…?" *Amazing Spider-Man* No. 35, Marvel Comics, 1966 pg. 11

[83] Stan Lee, "Calamity on the Campus!" *Fantastic Four* No. 35, Marvel Comics, 1965

universes, Lee was shockingly open about the contributions made by his collaborators. He was particularly effusive regarding the man he called the "ARTIST'S ARTIST"[84] Jack Kirby. Kirby, Lee's boss when he had first joined Timely in 1940, returned to Marvel in 1958 after the failure of his own publishing company in the mid-50s and a falling out with DC left him nowhere else to go. Despite his lack of viable employment options, Kirby remained an acknowledged giant of the comic field, and Lee lavished him with praise: "Some artists, such as Jack Kirby, need no plot at all. I mean, I'll just say to Jack, 'Let's let the next villain be Dr. Doom'… or I may not even say that. He may tell *me.* And then he goes home and does it. He's so good at plots, I'm sure he's a thousand times better than I…. Of course, occasionally I'll give him a plot, but we're practically both the writers on the things."[85]

As much as he might have coveted individual authorial recognition, Lee thrived in the industrial environment he built at Marvel in the 1960s, and his fondness for the profoundly collaborative Marvel Method would not diminish over the years. In 2001, he was invited to write a series for DC in which he would offer his interpretation of the competition's major characters. Lee quickly arranged a system identical to the one he had used for decades at Marvel. When an interviewer pointed out the connection, Lee happily proclaimed, "Yeah, I love that system."[86]

Lee coupled his praise of his collaborators with a willingness to joke about his own supposed narcissism and desire for undiluted credit for the Marvel universe. Responding to a fan requesting bios of Lee and Kirby, the editor self-deprecatingly demurred that "whenever Lee starts to write about himself, he uses the word 'I' and 'Me' so much that the typewriter quits!"[87] Later, when actor Don Keefer wrote

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[84] Stan Lee, "Where Stalks the Sandman?" *Fantastic Four* No. 61, Marvel Comics, 1967

[85] White 8

[86] Tasha Robinson, "Stan Lee," *A.V. Club*, 20 June 2001, https://www.avclub.com/stan-lee-1798208163

[87] Stan Lee, "The Coming of the Sub-Mariner!" *Fantastic Four* No. 4, Marvel Comics, 1962

in to ask why letters were signed, "Dear Stan and Jack" and not "Dear Jack and Stan," Lee retorted "Because it's Stan's typewriter and HE makes the rules – you troublemaker!"[88]

Years later, Lee would frame his decision to credit his artistic collaborators as part of a larger project to improve the cultural standing of comics, using Hollywood films as a model of the status he hoped the medium would achieve: "I thought we should treat ourselves the way the Hollywood people treat themselves. Out there, when a guy lifts a prop and moves it a few feet, he gets a screen credit as a grip. I wanted the same attention to be paid to the editors, inkers, colorists, and letterers. It was part of my effort to lift comics up, to get them some sort of recognition."[89] It was not a choice that paid immediate dividends. When those outside the world of comics looked at its production process, they did not see a collection of talented artists cooperating to produce an expression of their thoughts and experiences. They saw an assemblage of faceless cogs churning against each other to pump out a soulless, mass-produced product. They saw a machine.

<u>Lee's Voice</u>

Even as Lee promoted the collaborative creative process known as the Marvel Method and introduced readers to his colleagues, he also worked to establish and assert his own authorial voice, one which would eventually overshadow the contributions of the other members of the Bullpen. But Lee's search for a means to assert his authorship, like much else at Marvel in the early '60s, was a gradual process. The Marvel Age has often been depicted as a sudden epiphany, an almost instantaneous bout of genius that brought a universe of superheroes into existence. In fact, the process was a gradual one. As

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[88] Stan Lee, "The Mysterious Molecule Man!" *Fantastic Four* No. 20, Marvel Comics, 1963

[89] Fingeroth and Thomas

the success of Marvel's new approach to superheroes became clear, Lee remade the line bit by bit, replacing or retitling books, slipping superheroes into books designed for other genres, and alternating which titles shipped each month to dodge a restrictive distribution deal and increase the amount of room in which he and his collaborators could develop new characters.

As Lee remade the line, he also experimented with a variety of methods of asserting his authorship within the pages of the comics he edited. In the Marvel comics of the early '60s, Lee reminds readers of his role as author by inserting himself into the body of the fiction in various ways, a technique he would largely abandon by the middle of the decade. Lee had played with the third wall to draw attention to the fictional nature of the comic story and the role of the creator within it for years. In the August 1943 issue of Timely's funny-animal book *Terry-Toons*, Lee had a conniving fox, his machinations foiled by the ineptitude of a character known as the Ginch, turn to the reader and beg "Please, please dear artist, don't put me in the same strip with the Ginch again!"[90] His most common approach in comics released after *Fantastic Four* #1 was to feature his super-hero stars reading the very comics in which they and their contemporaries in the Marvel universe appeared, drawing reader attention to the fictional nature of the narrative world and thus highlighting the role of the author who created it. In the second issue of *Fantastic Four*, Reed Richards deters a group of invading aliens by showing them images of "some of Earth's most powerful warriors" – actually, a caption explains, illustrations "clipped from 'Strange Tales' and 'Journey Into Mystery,'"[91] other comics written by Lee. The month The Hulk debuted in his own comic, Johnny Storm is depicted in *Fantastic Four* reading a copy, declaring it "a great new comic mag." When he remarks that the Hulk reminds him of teammate The Thing, the enraged orange creature blares, "Gimmer that mag, squirt! I'll teach ya to compare me to a comic book

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[90] Stan Lee, *Terry-Toons* No. 11, Marvel Comics, 1943

[91] Stan Lee, "The Fantastic Four Meet the Skrulls From Outer Space!" *Fantastic Four* No. 2, Marvel Comics, 1962

monster!"[92] Occasionally this confusion between creator and fiction would allow fictional stars to slip into the "real" world of the comic paratext, as when the Human Torch appeared on a "Fantastic Four Feature Page" and informed readers that the book's editors had offered him the opportunity to respond to reader inquiries.[93]

Lee sometimes literally inserted himself into Marvel's fictional universe, as in *Fantastic Four* #10, an issue that saw Lee and Jack Kirby appear as major supporting characters. The event was considered a significant enough draw to feature the pair on the issue's cover. Next to the image of the two creators plotting the story inside, text blares, "In this epic issue: surprise follows surprise as you actually meet **Lee and Kirby** in the story!! Plus: A gorgeous pin-up of the Invisible Girl!" Inside, Lee and Kirby are seen collaborating on ideas for a new villain. Doctor Doom enters and forces the team to call Mister Fantastic, leader of the Fantastic Four and star of Kirby and Lee's top comic. The two creators lure the hero to the Marvel offices by claiming to want to discuss a new plot and, upon arrival, Fantastic is promptly kidnapped. The sequence is filled with playful pokes at the two men, who are always depicted with their backs to the reader. The Thing refers to them as "those two goons who write about us" and Lee asks Doom how he managed to return from being stranded in outer space at the end of his last appearance, a question the Doctor tetchily brushes aside as unimportant.[94] Fans were quick to catch on to the game, and several encouraged Lee to increase the incidents of self-insertion. One fan suggested, "why not put out a fantasy mag, THE WRITERS AND THE ARTISTS, and feature Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, etc. actually taking part in adventure, super-hero, and mystery thrillers! Boy, that would really usher in the MARVEL AGE OF COMICS! What do you think? Try it, huh?"[95]

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[92] Stan Lee, "Prisoners of Doctor Doom!" *Fantastic Four* No. 5, Marvel Comics, 1962, pg. 2

[93] Stan Lee, "Prisoners of the Puppet-Master!" *Fantastic Four* No. 8, Marvel Comics, 1962

[94] Stan Lee, "The Return of Doctor Doom!" *Fantastic Four* No. 10, Marvel Comics, 1963

[95] Stan Lee, "The Return of the Mole Man!" *Fantastic Four* No. 22, Marvel Comics, 1964

Over time Lee's self-insertions into the diegesis of Marvel's comics, either as a character or via the inclusion of comics he had co-created, decreased in frequency as he found a new way to ensure that his authorial voice was an explicit presence in every comic Marvel published.[96] Gerard Genette describes the paratext as "an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside" of a text. Such spaces include prefaces, chapter listings, or other elements that accompany the main text of a work. The paratext is a site in which the author is explicitly present; "Indeed, this fringe, [is] always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author."[97] Over the course of the '60s, Lee began to utilize such spaces to refine and emphasize his authorial voice, dramatically expanding the paratext that could be found in each of Marvel's comics. The first such space in a Marvel comic was introduced in *Fantastic Four* #3 (March '62) when Lee introduced a letters page, the Fantastic 4 Fan Page. One of DC's editors, Mort Weisinger had begun including a letters page in Superman comics in 1958, but it was Lee's intimate, jokey tone that converted such pages into an effective tool for building reader loyalty.[98] Lee justified the inclusion of the section by celebrating the unusual intellect of the company's readership: "We've just noticed something… unlike many other collections of letters in different mags, our fans all seem to write well, and intelligently. We assume this denotes that our readers are a cut above average, and that's the way we like 'em!"[99] Lee soon introduced similar letter pages to other publications he co-created. He followed up these pages by adding Bullpen Bulletins and finally, in comics cover-dated June 1967, Lee introduced Stan's Soapbox, an editorial that would feature in all of Marvel's 18 monthly releases. It was in these paratextual spaces that Lee began developing the unique voice that would

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[96] They did not cease entirely, and Lee and his collaborators would still appear occasionally, such as in a sequence from 1967's Daredevil Annual 1 that saw the editor, still balding and clean-shaven, deep in a story conference with the young artist Gene Colan.

[97] Gerard Genette, Paratexts, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pg 1

[98] Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Of Comics and Men, transl. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009)

[99] Stan Lee, "The Menace of the Miracle Man" *Fantastic Four* No. 3, Marvel Comics, 1962.

eventually infiltrate the text of the comics themselves. Publicly, Lee framed these developments as accommodations made to fans' wishes. Privately, such as in a letter from Lee's protégé Roy Thomas to Lee himself, insiders openly spoke of them as "self-promotion."[100]

Central to Lee's self-promotion was the development of a distinct patois and stable of catchphrases. In the many comics he wrote prior to the first issue of *Fantastic Four*, Lee used a fairly unobtrusive style of prose bereft of the humor and hyperbole that would define his later work. By the end of 1963, however, Lee was happily combining corny humor, self-deprecation, alliteration, hyperbole and self-consciously "hip" phrases. He began peppering his speech with catchphrases including, "face front, true believers," and "Excelsior," turns of phrase that would become eminently familiar to readers in subsequent years. A comic-closing caption in *Fantastic Four* #29 provides an example of Lee's developing voice: "Whether this ish is a hit or a flop remains to be seen… but one thing is certain… it ought to sell like crazy on Yancy Street! More stars, slapstick, and surprises next ish! We'll be expecting you! 'Nuff said!!"[101] Lee's voice became more extreme in 1965 and '66 as the mainstream press began to catch wind of Marvel's popularity and as Lee began to play the role of the author on college campuses. Eventually, the hyperbolic vocabulary of Lee the character would become indistinguishable from that of Lee the man, as cries of "Excelsior!" appeared in correspondence with even his closest friends, including Roy Thomas and filmmaker Alain Resnais.[102] As he explained to Ray Bradbury, "It beats trying to decide whether to write 'Sincerely yours', 'Cordially yours', or 'Yours truly.'"[103]

By 1965, Lee was a constant, ostentatious presence in the text and paratext of Marvel's comics. As Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon put it, "Lee's showy writing… helped him transcend the

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[100] Roy Thomas to Stan Lee, 10/19/1976, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

[101] Stan Lee, "It Started on Yancy Street," *Fantastic Four* No. 29, Marvel Comics, 1964.

[102] Stan Lee to Alain Resnais, 5/23/1979, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[103] Stan Lee to Ray Bradbury, 10/6/1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

traditional writer and editor roles to become Marvel's host, the man responsible for bringing the readers the entertainment, a kind of comic-book Ed Sullivan who was never too far away from the side curtains."[104] In fact, the more apt comparison might be to Alfred Hitchcock or the post-war Walt Disney, a creator who did not merely host "his" fiction but laid constant claim to authorship by entering it, interacting with its characters, and even sometimes playing a role in the narrative. Lee had refined his original techniques, but he had ensured that no character was more central to the Marvel Universe then the omnipotent and omniscient overseer "Stan Lee."

Lee was not the first writer to attempt to establish a traditionally authorial voice in a fundamentally collaborative medium. As Christine Bold explains, creators in the dime novel tradition, a direct ancestor of the kind of comics Lee co-created, were similarly eager to lay claim to romantic authorship. In fact, many of the techniques Lee employed were innovated decades earlier by dime novel writers including Ned Buntline, George Lippard, and Eden Southworth. Like his predecessors, Lee emphasized narration and regularly drew attention to the process of writing the story and the artificiality and absurdity of comic book conventions to ensure that his role as creator of the fiction remained constantly in view. Buntline, for instance, would frequently interrupt the story proper to remind readers of his presence: "This story has been written on a bed of sickness, amid pain and suffering, with a fevered brow and a nervous hand."[105]

Over time, Bold explains, these attempts by the writer to assert his voice were quieted as the production of dime novels became more fully industrialized. The writer's role as the visible architect of the work was superseded by that of the editor, who could use a book's paratextual spaces to lay claim to creative supremacy. Lee had a fundamental advantage over his dime novel predecessors, however, since

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[104] Raphael and Spurgeon, 105

[105] Catherine Bold, "The Voice of the Fiction Factory in Dime and Pulp Westerns," *Journal of American Studies* iss. 17(i), pg 32

he acted as both editor and writer and in the former role could use his control of the paratext, the one portion of the printed comic he produced almost entirely without collaborators, to assert his authorial presence.

Early in the Marvel Age, Lee signaled an awareness of the possible contradictions between the two roles by attempting to obfuscate his dual standing as both editor and writer. Lee emphasized the traditional romantic role of author rather than the essentially collaborative and managerial role as editor. Despite the fact that Lee was the only individual at Marvel to occupy the role, he would frequently refer to multiple editors, as in *Fantastic Four* #8, when the Human Torch explains that, "in answer to your enthusiastic requests, the editors have given me this page on which to answer some questions about myself!"[106] In a later issue, Lee included a confusing caption saying "Editor's Note: By now, you're probably thinking that Stan and Jack have flipped their lids! But wait – things may get even whackier!"[107] As the media began to take note of Marvel and its new approach to superheroes, Lee's dual role as writer and editor would become an increasing source of conflict between Stan and his collaborators.

<div align="center">Meeting the Press</div>

The conflict between the industrial process that produced Marvel's comics and Lee's increasing assumption of an authorial persona remained largely dormant until exacerbated by the attention of the press. In 1964, Lee and his collaborators' initial creative burst was drawing to a close. While the next several years would see the Marvel staff develop and refine their storytelling technique and create a range

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[106] Stan Lee, "Prisoners of the Puppet-Master!"

[107] Stan Lee, "A Visit with the Fantastic Four/ The Impossible Man," *Fantastic Four* No. 11, Marvel Comics, 1963

of intriguing supporting players, the main cast of the Marvel universe was complete with the introduction of Daredevil in the first months of the year. The scope of the Marvel Revolution's success, however, was only just becoming clear. Between mid-1965 and late 1966, Marvel's popularity on campus, *Batman*'s popularity on television, and pop art's popularity with the highbrow and middlebrow would see a brief flurry of media attention focused on comic books.

Stories about Marvel began to appear in the press in April 1965 with a feature in the *Village Voice*, "The Super-Anti Hero in Forest Hills." The article's author Sally Kempton characterized Marvel's popularity as the result of a "pop-cult," one of many such groups the press was eager to highlight in the mid-60s. The formation of such "cults" was a fashionable game among the intellectual and social elite, who found a slightly transgressive sense of enjoyment by trawling through "pop," defined here as any object of "which a normal aesthetic judgement would disapprove." It was the certainty of their ability to make such judgements that allowed the fashionable to safely amuse themselves with marginalized cultural products and form distanced, bemused fandoms like the "homosexual publications" cult, discovered by the *New York Times*.[108] Kempton's article illustrates a key aspect of the mid-60s comic-book-craze: the "pop" and "camp" movements provided audiences with a way to enjoy lowbrow material while protecting – and even reinforcing – their superior cultural position.

In one of the article's most striking passages, Kempton praised Marvel comics for their self-consciousness, their awareness of their own absurdity. A key piece of evidence for her claim was that, unlike most comics, Marvel's stories were signed. Echoing widespread opinions about the production of mass culture, Kempton implied that claims of authorship for such material could only be made with tongue planted firmly in cheek.[109] Despite the assumed position of unchallenged cultural superiority from

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[108] Sally Kempton, "The Super-Anti Hero in Forest Hills," *Village Voice*, 1 April 1965

[109] Kempton

which the article was written, Lee was ecstatic about any wide media coverage, crowing about the *Voice* piece in the pages of Marvel's comics: "Special note: We want to thank the editors of New York's famous VILLAGE VOICE for the wonderful write-up they gave the Marvel Group, and the FANTASTIC FOUR AND SPIDER-MAN in particular. We're frankly flattered and pleased as punch! 'Nuff said!"[110]

As Marvel began to gain the attention of the press in late '65 and early '66, the collaborative nature of comic creation became obscured as reporters and interviewers forced more traditional notions of romantic authorship onto the comic industry. A far more charismatic figure then the gruff Jack Kirby or the reclusive Steve Ditko, his primary creative partner in the production of Spider-Man, Lee struck reporters as the best suited of Marvel's major creators to assume the role of creative genius. In addition, while comic fans would increasingly develop an essentialist understanding of comic creation that revered the unique role of the artist in the creative process, Lee's role of writer was far more familiar to the newspaper and magazine reporters tasked with attempting to understand the new phenomenon sweeping college campuses. Lee was also a highly performative speaker, and numerous colleagues recalled him acting out the comic stories he was discussing, leaping onto his desk or running about the room in a manner guaranteed to make an impression on an interviewer. Finally, of course, Lee was in no particular hurry to dissuade reporters from respectable publications that he was, in fact, the sole motivating force behind the Marvel universe.

A 1966 *Esquire* article described Lee simply as the "author of Marvel's ten super-hero comics."[111] That same year, Roger Ebert, writing a piece on the resurgence of comics for the *Chicago Sun-Time*'s *Midwest Magazine*, featured an interview with comic fan P.A. LaChapelle which framed Lee as a lone artistic voice in the wasteland of 1950s comic books: "'But always there was Stan Lee, doing

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[110] Stan Lee, "Lo! There Shall be an Ending!" *Fantastic Four* No. 43, Marvel Comics, 1965

[111] "O.K., You Passed the 2-S Test – Now You're Smart Enough for Comic Books," *Esquire*, Sept. 1966, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

fine things,' Miss LaChapelle sighed in the tone ordinarily reserved for descriptions of Scott Fitzgerald's

last days in Hollywood. Impressed by her admiration, we contacted the great man himself."[112] In a

segment of a *National Observer* story that Lee happily reprinted in Marvel's comics, the reporter

explained: "The turning point for comics was about three years ago, when Stan Lee decided to try to

reach readers beyond the bubble-gum brigade. Aiming at high school and college students, he created the

FANTASTIC FOUR."[113]

Smaller papers also picked up on the Marvel phenomenon and continued the same assumptions

about authorship. A typical article in *The Cleveland Press* in early 1966 once again frames the story in

terms of Marvel's popularity, a popularity it attributes to Lee: "Marvel… started aiming its comic books

at older readers when Lee's boredom with 22 years of writing the same type of story caused him to try a

hip, sophisticated type of story and dialogue." The second half of the article, entitled "The Man Behind It

All," is a typically flattering portrait of Lee. Author Thompson attributes Marvel's newfound success

entirely to Lee's writing, explaining that he had developed a style that "has won Marvel Comics a new

group of readers – college students and even professors – who relish the humor and the problems of Lee's

super-characters." Lee is the only comic creator named in the piece despite a brief mention of the Marvel

Method late in the article, and Marvel's products are referred to as "Lee's comics." [114]

The focus on Lee as the author of the Marvel Universe only increased in the early '70s. Articles

with titles like "The Marvelous Stan Lee," "The Amazing Stan Lee," and "Stan Lee, Superhero"

proliferated.[115] More and more, reporters were inclined to view Marvel's comics in romantic terms, as the

expression of their primary author's rich inner life. A question from a 1976 interview is typical of such

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[112] Roger Ebert, "A Comeback for Comic Books," *Midwest Magazine of the Chicago Sun-Times*, 18 Dec. 1966

[113] Stan Lee, "The Startling Saga of the Silver Surfer," Fantastic Four No. 50, Marvel Comics 1966

[114] Thompson

[115] Rapheal and Spurgeon, pg. 159

views, as a reporter asks Lee whether he felt, "much of the success of the company could be due to the fact that you have stamped your personality onto Marvel?"[116]

Lee varied his attitudes regarding authorship based on his perception of his audience. In outlets in which the primary audience was likely to be familiar with comic books, Lee was unstinting in his praise for his collaborators and disarmingly open about the Marvel Method. The more mainstream Lee expected the audience to be, however, the more he was inclined to agree with interviewers' assumptions that Marvel's characters were a true product of romantic authorship, an expression of Lee's inner thoughts and feelings: in a 1986 interview, Diane Sawyer asked Lee, "Spider-Man was fashioned after a lot of your neuroses, is that true?" to which Lee replied, "I tried to keep him realistic, and I don't know of anybody more realistic than I am, so whatever little things worried me, I'd have Spider-Man worry about them too." Sawyer proceeded to ask Lee about the "collection of crazies" at Marvel who helped him to craft Spider-Man comics, but Lee declined to discuss collaboration: "it really wasn't that much of a conference. Usually you did it on your own. I'd just be home alone and I'd be thinking, what is it I can do with Spider-Man that will be unexpected…." Asked again about the "community of zany people," Lee demurred, "the other zanies were doing their own stories."[117] He makes no mention of Ditko, Kirby, or any of the other artists with whom he worked.

Lee's relationship with his colleagues was already showing the strains inherent to the collaborative process of creation, but the media coverage and Lee's reaction to it made matters significantly worse. Jack Kirby was particularly hurt by a 1966 *New York Herald-Tribune* article that depicted Lee as the prime creative mover at the publisher, the Marvel Revolution solely a product of "Lee's vision." Passages explaining that Lee, "followed up [The Fantastic Four] with the most off-beat

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[116] *Comic Media News*

[117] Diane Sawyer, "Stan Lee Interview," *CBS Morning News*, 24 June 1986

character he could think of – his masterpiece, Spider-Man... the Raskolnikov of the funnies, a worthy

rival to Bellow's Herzog for the Neurotic Hipster Championship of our time," rubbed salt in Kirby's

wounds. As the article neared its close, it finally mentioned that Lee does, in fact, have artistic

collaborators, and explained Lee's habit of crediting them in the pages of Marvel's books as an example

of his largesse. Kirby is finally mentioned – "a middle-aged man with baggy eyes and a baggy Robert

Hall-ish suit… sucking a huge green cigar… if you stood next to him on the subway you would peg him

for the assistant foreman in a girdle factory." The description couches the contrast between Lee and

Kirby in surprisingly class-based terms, explicitly painting Kirby as a blue-collar drudge completely

unlike the middle-class Lee, described as possessing a "horsy jaw and humorous eyes, thinning but

tasteful gray hair, the brightest-colored Ivy wardrobe in captivity and a deep suntan that comes from

working every Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday on his suburban terrace, cranking out three

complete Marvel mags weekly." [118] The *Herald Tribune* article provoked Kirby's wife Roz to phone Lee

and vent her rage at the editor. In response, Lee altered the way in which Kirby was credited in Marvel

books on which the artist worked, opening every comic with a note that it was, "produced by Stan Lee

and Jack Kirby." Despite this belated acknowledgement of Kirby's importance, the damage to the

partnership had been done.[119]

Lee's work with Jack Kirby would continue for several more years, but the media attention of the

mid-60s strained it nearly to its breaking point. Kirby made careful note of the tone of the media

coverage surrounding Marvel. Industry rumor held that he kept a file of articles about Stan Lee, authorial

genius. For his part, Lee depicted the focus on him as a matter beyond his control: "I've had that problem

all my life…. I'm the guy who spent at least ten years going to every college in America, appearing on

[118] Nat Freeland, "Super Heroes with Super Problems," *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 Jan. 1966 Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[119] John Wells, American Comic Book Chronicles: 1965-69 (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2014)

television shows, radio shows, boosting Marvel, promoting Marvel all I could. I began to get identified with Marvel. People thought of Marvel, they thought of me."[120]

Joe Simon, Lee's former boss and Kirby's former partner, was not a fan of his former assistant's new image. In a 1966 issue of *Sick*, a Mad knock-off, Simon presented "The New Age of Comics" featuring the egomaniacal "Sam Me" who took credit for everyone else's ideas and mutilated his artist's drawings. Perhaps most damning was Sam's disdain for the medium – he explained that he had to put his name on every comic because "How else can I make a living in this ridiculous business?"[121]

<div align="center">

Comic Class

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Simon's mockery of Lee struck at a deep and uncomfortable truth about the comic editor: he was profoundly bothered by the fact that most of America viewed his profession as frivolous at best, contemptable at worst. When an interviewer commented, "I imagine you rather enjoy being Stan Lee," the comic creator spun an anecdote involving a hypothetical dinner party that he would recount often in the years to come:

> In the first fifteen years or so that I was the head writer and editor at Timely and Atlas, I
> remember, my wife and I would go to cocktail parties and somebody would say, 'What do you
> do?' and I'd say, 'Oh, I'm a writer.' 'Really? What do you write?' And I'd start getting a little
> nervous and I'd say, 'Uh, magazine stories.' 'Really? What magazine?' And I knew there was
> no way of avoiding it, and I'd end up saying, 'Comic books,' and suddenly the person's

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[120] Raphael and Spurgeon, 128

[121] Joe Simon, "New Age of Comics," *Sick* no. 48, Crestwood Publications, 1966

expression would change… 'Oh, isn't that nice,' and they'd walk away, you know, looking for some television or radio or novelist celebrity.

Lee went on to make clear that his public acceptance at such middle-class social functions hinged on his status as the sole author of Marvel's success: "That's all changed now. I go to places and I'm held up as one of the more interesting celebrities… and people go over to the playwrights, you know, and say 'Hey, I want you to meet Stan Lee, he's the head of Marvel Comics, he made up Spider-Man.'"[122]

Lee's motivations in launching the Marvel Revolution had not primarily been, as he would later contend, an effort to fulfill himself artistically. Instead, Lee's motivations in co-creating the Fantastic Four and subsequently remaking the entire comic line in its image had been part of a larger attempt to improve his reputation so that he could finally escape the comic industry.[123] Lee was undertaking a two-pronged approach to leaving the comic field. First, through freelance work and material put out by his Madison Management imprint, he was trying to create something, anything unrelated to comics that would catch on with the public. Secondly, he was attempting to elevate the reputation of the Marvel line in particular and comic books in general so that his past work experience could serve to bolster, or at least not impair, his resume. Lee would continue to pursue these two sometimes conflicting paths for the next two decades, even as he became increasingly linked to Marvel Comics in the public consciousness.

The persistence of derogatory attitudes towards comics and their readership and the degree to which issues of cultural standing intersected with issues of social class were illustrated by a 1968 radio conversation in which Lee crossed swords with late night radio host Barry Farber and Hilde Mosse, Fredric Wertham's colleague in the 1950s assault on comics. The event was occasioned by a new crusade to purify children's media of malign influences, this time aimed at Saturday morning cartoons rather than

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[122] Maeder

[123] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 89

comic books. Marvel's early cross-media attempts, which focused largely on animation, were deeply affected by this new wave of public outrage. In a particularly telling exchange, Farber explained to Lee why he is convinced comics have more power than books or film: "Because you're in a lower-class mentality, either because of lower age, which is excusable, or because of normal middle age and lower mentality, which is less excusable, but you're in the much more impressionable group. But if I put [a message] in the medium of a compelling cartoon or comic book series, my audience is my marionette. My readership is my constituency. They're my toy, almost."[124]

Farber's sneering dismissal is telling on a number of levels. He conflates the "lower class" not only with "lower mentality" but also with children, all grouped into a category that requires protection by the middle- and upper-class. Such elisions have a long history in the rhetoric of moralists seeking to purify American culture, stretching back to Anthony Comstock and beyond. In another rhetorical move that accentuates the reasons Lee was so eager to leave the field, Farber initially phrases his comment as though it is Lee himself, to whose question he is responding, that he condemns as "lower class." When he begins discussing the agency exerted by the comic creator on his readership, he slips immediately into the first person, excluding Lee from that power entirely. Farber thus neatly ties Lee to his imagined "lower class" fans while denying him any creative agency.

In the first days of the Marvel Age, comic readers responded to views like Farber's in a number of ways. Some, like readers Rusty and Larry Bush, used humor and self-deprecation, referring to the frequent inclusion of comics within the *Fantastic Four* storylines by quipping, "We like the way the FF are always reading comics! (showing their high mentality!)"[125] Other fans expressed anxiety regarding

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[124] Barry Farber Show, WOR-AM Radio, 12 November 1968, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[125] "Prisoners of the Puppet Master!"

the stigmas attached to comic fandom and felt the need to explicitly assert their social class, intellectual abilities, and cultural status to offset their role as comic readers. Reader Marya Rice asserted:

> If this letter, or part of it, gets printed on your fan page, perhaps some of your critics will think that one such as I, who indulges in reading so-called 'light' material is a person of rather low intelligence. (Comic readers are held somewhat in scorn in some literary circles, you know.) I would like to say on my own behalf, that I do hold a completed college degree and that I also read other matter than comic magazines.[126]

Lee addressed such reader concerns and made one of his first explicit declarations of a mission to elevate comics as a cultural form in *Fantastic Four* #24, cover dated March 1964:

> By the way, many readers say they don't like referring to our mags as 'Comic' mags. We understand their feeling, but we must disagree! It is our intention, here at Marvel, to produce comics which are so well-written and well-drawn, that they'll elevate the entire field in the minds of the public! After all, comic magazines are an art form, as creative and enjoyable as any other! It is up to US, the producers, and YOU, the fans, to make comics something to be proud of.[127]

This declaration was likely written in the final months of 1963, at roughly the same moment Marvel's popularity on college campuses became clear and Lee began planning his earliest university speaking visits.

But Lee was not yet committed to raising the cultural standard of the entire comic industry. Instead, his impulse was to attempt to separate Marvel from the less prestigious competition. In *Fantastic Four* #38, cover dated May 1965, Lee and his colleagues have returning villain Paste Pot Pete change his

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[126] Stan Lee, "The Micro-World of Doctor Doom," *Fantastic Four* #16, Marvel Comics 1963

[127] "The Infant Terrible"

name because it sounds "too much like a comic title!"[128] A few months later, in books cover-dated September 1965, Lee reversed his earlier defense of the term "comics" and announced that, to avoid the stigmas attached to the word, all Marvel publications would henceforth be labeled and promoted as "Marvel Pop Art Productions." Lee proclaimed "Remember, from now on, Brand X, Y, and Z are comic books, but when you buy a Marvel mag, you ask for a Marvel Pop Art book!"[129] The experiment lasted four months before a fandom less willing than Lee to give up on the comic book form convinced the editor to abandon the endeavor.

Over the course of the '60s, as Lee emerged as the primary public face for the entire comic industry, he also became the most visible proponent for comics as a cultural institution. As was his wont, Lee revised his own origin story to give the impression that he had always intended to use Marvel as a platform to further the cause of comic book respectability rather than taking up the mantle hesitantly and equivocally. In a 1976 interview, Lee explained, "In the beginning I wasn't just pushing Marvel. In the beginning I thought it was terrible that people didn't respect comics enough, and I would go on radio and TV, talk at colleges, etc., just trying to explain that comics in general are really an art form. They're as deserving of critical attention as the movies, television, theatre, etc."[130] In actuality Lee adopted the role of comic advocate only gradually, and his defense of comics as cultural production was defined at the same moment his own authorial aspirations came to the fore.

In the early days '60s, Lee dismissed fans comparing him to prominent, highbrow authors. Indeed, he even scoffed at comparisons to popular fiction writers like Erle Stanley Gardiner, whose audience was, at best, middlebrow. Gradually, as he embraced the role of comic books' foremost champion, Lee became more willing to consider such high-culture comparisons. When Cornell student

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[128] Stan Lee, "A House There Was!" *Fantastic Four* No. 88, Marvel Comics 1969

[129] "To Save You, Why Must I Kill You?"

[130] *Comic Media News*

Dave Stone described Marvel's panels as being, "as dramatically composed as anything Orson Welles ever put on film," or the University of Maryland's Richard Weingroff described Spider-Man as, "comicdom's Hamlet, comicdom's Raskolnikov,"[131] or the *New York Herald Tribune* claimed, "every costumed hero in Lee's new Marvel Comics mythology displaces enough symbolic weight to become grist for an English Lit. Ph.D. thesis,"[132] Lee was in no hurry to challenge them. Others in Marvel's hierarchy were less willing to countenance Lee's association with some of literature's greatest names: in a 1974 letter to animator Joe Barbera proposing various Marvel characters for possible television programs, CEO Albert E. Landau derisively noted "As you can see, you're dealing with complex three-dimensional personalities. Someday I imagine Stan will be compared to Dostoevsky."[133]

Such pretentious comparisons did not escape the notice of Lee's competitors. In the letters column of a 1966 issue of DC's *World's Finest*, a reader remarked on the tendency of Marvel's editor to liken himself to Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott.[134] Editor Mort Weisinger replied, "That's why everyone calls his magazines Brand I,… I for imitator and I for 'I'm great.' Actually, we feel this hambo will be remembered when Shakespeare and Scott are forgotten – not before!"[135] In his own letter columns, fellow DC editor Julius Schwartz referred to Marvel as "Brand Ego."[136] In 1968 DC launched a new series, Angel and the Ape, in which a gorilla cartoonist worked for a self-centered editor named Stan Bragg. The only sort of insults that seemed to phase Lee were claims that he didn't write all his own

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[131] "O.K., You Passed the 2-S Test – Now You're Smart Enough for Comic Books"

[132] Freeland

[133] Albert E Landau to Joe Barbera, 10/8/1974, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[134] Wells, American Comic Book Chronicles: 1965-69

[135] Otto Binder, E. Nelson Bridwell, and Edmond Hamilton, "The Federation of Bizarro Idiots/ The Puzzle of the Perilous Planetoid," *World's Finest* No. 156, DC Comics 1966

[136] John Broome and Robert Kanigher, "The Case of the Curious Costume/ Mirror with the 20-20 Vision," *Flash* No. 161, DC Comics 1966

stories. One attack from DC regarding Lee's authorship earned a sharp rejoinder in the pages of Marvel Comics: "We're really not mad at anybody, except the hambone who said we don't write all our own stories! We almost wish he were right – then maybe we would not have these bags under our eyes from all those sleepless nights hunched over our typewriter!"[137]

The disdain expressed by rival publishers towards Lee's mission of uplift was hardly surprising, since a key component of his stated mission was the exposure and ostracization of the exploitative, substandard material produced by Marvel's competition. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Paul Gabilliet has considered comic books' attempts to achieve legitimacy, the highest level of the cultural hierarchy, over the course of the 20th century. For Gabilliet, legitimacy is the "ultimate degree of recognition by the public sphere,"[138] a position in which reference to a medium invokes the finest examples of that medium; literature, for instance, refers to the works of Hemmingway and Sartre rather than those of Grisham or Crichton, for whom a sub-designation, "popular literature," must be invoked. "Comics," needless to say, have never achieved such a status - for much of the 20th century, the term invoked the lowest form of the medium. What's more, as Gabilliet points out, cultural judgements on a medium as a whole weighed on its cultural standing more heavily than the influence of any one work that might gain momentary acclaim. It was nearly impossible for an individual work or creator to truly escape the gravitational pull of the low standing of the medium as a whole.

It is thus unsurprising that Lee was unenthusiastic about the wave of opportunistic new publishers that entered the field in the wake the comic industry's sudden prominence. He was similarly dismayed about the speed with which existing publishers altered their lines to imitate Marvel's successful approach to superheroes. These attempts at imitation gave Lee the opportunity to use his emerging role as the

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[137] Stan Lee, "…And One Shall Save Him!" Fantastic Four No. 62, Marvel Comics 1967

[138] Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005)

champion of comics' cultural status as a club with which to bludgeon Marvel's competitors. In the same issue in which Lee thanked the *Village Voice* for publishing one of the earliest articles about Marvel, he also delivered his first attack against "Brand Echh," his not-particularly-subtle nickname for DC.[139] In comics cover-dated June 1966, Lee moved beyond the derogatory nicknames, issuing a screed against the publishers dragging down the industry. The editor opens with one of his earliest, clearest proclamations of the comic books as a genuine art form, couched in references to the cultural status of film and other media: "As you know, Marvel has spent years trying to upgrade the art of comic magazines – for an art it truly is, every bit as much as the cinema, the legitimate stage, or any other form of creative expression." This truth is being obscured, however, by the schlock other publishers are producing: "We don't resent competition – indeed, we welcome it. But, we DO resent shabby, carelessly-produced, badly-written and -drawn, conscienceless IMITATIONS of our Marvel mags – imitations which are callously lacking in quality, and which are produced for the sole purpose of making a fast profit in the very field which they themselves are helping to keep at the bottom of the artistic totem pole!" Lee repeatedly declares that his anger is not caused by any financial impact on Marvel but on the medium as a whole: "If these so-called competitors would expend an equal amount of creative effort on the CONTENT of their mags, we'd have no objection, but all they are doing is confusing the public, and giving new ammunition to those who choose to downgrade comics!"[140]

Lee's comments regarding other publishers could be surprisingly sweeping. In a 1968 radio interview, Lee blamed the public disdain heaped on comics on the quality of personnel that had inhabited the industry: "The only bad thing about comics has been the fact that the people in the industry were usually the dregs. And certainly I don't mean this as an all-inclusive label, but, by and large, people who weren't good enough to write to sell books, to sell radio shows, or TV shows, or something, could always

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[139] "Lo! There Shall Be an Ending!"

[140] Stan Lee, "This Man… This Monster!" Fantastic Four No. 51, Marvel Comics, 1966

somehow make sort of a living writing a comic book, because the editors weren't that particular. And it goes more for the writers than the artists."[141] Lee carefully omits any consideration of the social forces that pushed young writers such as himself into a culturally marginal field of production. Lee goes on to explain that artists can do little to elevate the medium – after all, there had always been talented artists working in comics, and their efforts had never proved successful in improving public perceptions. Instead, Lee formulates the problem of the social stigma attached to comics as one that can be solved only by writers and, more specifically, by Lee himself.[142]

The University Forms Lee

In the mid-60s, it became clear that Marvel's new approach to superhero stories had found a previously untapped comic book audience on college campuses. These new readers made themselves known via a flood of letters to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and during the first five years after the publication of *Fantastic Four* #1 Marvel received missives from Southern Illinois University, Missouri School of Mines, Williams College, New York University, Bard College, the University of Chicago, Eastern Illinois University, Stanford University, Columbia College, Queens College, Lehigh University, Rice University, Duke, M.I.T., Yale, Harvard, Amarillo College, Princeton, and a variety of other universities. The letters tended to present comic reading on campus as a community activity, with fraternities, sororities, or dorm floors compiling libraries of back issues or passing comics from one reader to the next. Fans were eager to accentuate their proselytizing mission, discussing at great length their efforts to spread the Marvel faith around the quad. Marvel's popularity among the denizens of the

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[141] Neal Conan interview

[142] Neal Conan interview

ivory tower provided Lee with legitimacy, media attention, a foundation on which to base claims for the cultural standing of comics, and a basis for differentiating his books from the material released by other publishers: "Well, let's say that there have been a lot of articles written about Marvel which give us our due, but most people who don't know the business lump all comic magazines together, which is something that always annoys me a bit. Because I think I can truthfully say that Marvel comics are popular on campus – and other comics are not."[143]

A letter from Bill Hauptman, who would go on to become a Tony-award winning playwright, is typical of the missives Marvel received from college students:

Dear Stan and Jack:

As an English major at the University of Texas, I would like to congratulate you on the high standards of literary excellence you've set in "The World's Greatest Comic Magazine." I love it! Sometimes the symbolism is too much for me – but that doesn't keep me from enjoying each exciting issue.

Lee tended to reply to such early letters by defusing the praise with self-effacing humor: "Bill, we'll REALLY know we've arrived when we hear that some English major wrote a term paper about the F.F., thereby winning a scholarship! But we won't hold our breaths waiting!"[144]

Lee would quickly become less dismissive about the academic resonance of Marvel's comics. By *Fantastic Four* #28, cover dated July 1964, Lee responded to a fan who wrote, "I go to high school and still like your mags," by quipping, "Wait'll you go to college, Harry – you'll LOVE 'em!"[145]

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[143] Hurd

[144] Stan Lee, "The Merciless Puppet Master," Fantastic Four No. 14, Marvel Comics, 1963

[145] Stan Lee, "We Have to Fight the X-Men!" Fantastic Four No. 28, Marvel Comics, 1964

The letters of praise reaching Marvel were tied to larger changes within American colleges as a whole. As post-modern theory became increasingly influential among academics, the worst fears of Dwight Macdonald were realized - traditional boundaries between high and low culture began to weaken and collapse. European intellectuals like Umberto Eco proved particularly willing to reevaluate the comic book, and his writings and those of his contemporaries began to find their way into American universities in the late '60s. Post-modernism's assault on the high/low dichotomy was not as complete or as unequivocal as it is sometimes portrayed, of course. Pop art, one of the chief manifestations of the post-modern impulse, was popularized by practitioners like Lichtenstein who, Mark Francis writes, was not interested in collapsing categories of high and low culture but rather in putting them in conversation with one another while clearly reinforcing his own position on the former side.[146] Similarly, post-modern scholars like Eco and Jean Baudrillard sometimes seemed less concerned with eliminating cultural divisions then in relocating them.

Motivated in large part by the rise of post-modernism, university departments began to expand their view beyond traditional subjects and embrace the study of popular culture. American Studies departments provided a key space for academic engagement with media that had once been dismissed as meaningless. Such departments emerged in the '30s and '40s, birthed by a group of academic rebels fueled by "a recognition of the ill effects of industrial capitalism and a profound sensitivity to class divisions within the United States." One of their first missions was to rescue American literature from its stigmatization as an inferior offshoot of British texts, an effort that laid the groundwork for the field's later serious engagement with marginalized forms like the comic book. Throughout the '50s, American Studies became increasingly prominent and institutionalized. During the '60s, American Scholars reached back to an earlier tradition in the field which had faded somewhat during the '50s and began to engage seriously with popular culture, understanding it as "a force created largely by marginalized

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[146] Mark Francis, Pop, (London: Phaidon Press, 2010) pg 27

Americans who used it not only to express, but also to create, resistance to the dominant culture." [147] The comic industry, founded in large part by Jewish Americans and other marginalized groups barred from employment elsewhere, was one such manifestation of popular culture.[148] Lee took a special interest in American Studies, communicating with professors and discounting his speaking fee to appear at symposiums.[149] Lee was more than happy to face the deconstruction of cultural studies and the lingering disdain among many post-modernists if it meant that respectable people were talking about him and the comics he produced.

In the last years of the '60s and the early days of the '70s, Marvel began to find its way out of the dorm and into the classroom with increasingly frequency. A 1966 *Esquire* article opens with an anecdote in which William David Sherman, an English teacher at State University of New York at Buffalo, wrote to Lee to request 25 copies of *Fantastic Four* #46, explaining "I wish to use them in my course on contemporary American Literature…. I know the class will dig them, and I hope that in them they will see various archetypal and mythological patterns at work which could give them better insight to where things are today."[150] Many of the teachers bringing comic books to the classroom were recent graduates who had been steeped in Marvel's popularity as students. In the early '70s one such young man, Michael Uslan, began teaching the first accredited college course on comic books, Indiana University's "The Comic Book in America." Uslan, a media-savvy young academic, ensured that the course received widespread press coverage. Similar courses began appearing around the country, though they still faced opposition from professors and administrators unconvinced of the cultural worthiness of comic books. When Bill Rozakis, future co-creator of the character 'Mazing Man and resident historian for DC Comics,

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[147] Elaine Tyler May, "The Radical Roots of American Studies," 9 Nov. 1995, *American Studies at the University of Virginia,* http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR2/may.html

[148] May

[149] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 161

[150] "O.K., You Passed the 2-S Test – Now You're Smart Enough for Comic Books"

attempted to launch such a class at Hofstra University in 1972, the chairman of the English Department sniffed, "Are you trying to equate Superman with Shakespeare?"[151]

Marvel's newfound popularity on college campuses not only gratified Lee, it also legitimized him in the view of the press and played a key role in the media's coverage of Marvel throughout 1965 and 1966. Reporters eager to understand and report on the dramatic social and cultural changes sweeping college campuses took Marvel's popularity among students as justification for reporting on the once-marginal comic industry. The first major magazine to cover Marvel at length, what Lee described as the "erudite, ever lovin' ESQUIRE,"[152] did so in an issue focused on college campuses. Under the heading, "As Barry Jenkins, Ohio '69, Says: 'A Person Has to Have Intelligence to Read Them,'" the article quoted effusive praise from eight college students. [153]

Lee himself quickly became a fixture on college campuses, and in the first half of 1964 he made his first appearance as a speaker at a university. These early visits were hardly lucrative affairs – a June 1964 visit to Bard college netted the veteran editor an honorarium of $50.[154] By the middle of 1966, Lee had already spoken at Princeton, NYU, Columbia, and Bard (where, *Esquire* noted, "he drew a bigger audience than President Eisenhower.")[155] Lee reveled in the attention lavished on him during his campus visits. Producer Bob Lawrence, who joined Lee on several of his early university sojourns, describes one such event: "I think we spent three days at Chapel Hill with them. They'd stay up all night drinking

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[151] Fingeroth and Thomas, pg 55

[152] Stan Lee, "Klaw, the Murderous Master of Sound!" Fantastic Four No. 56, Marvel Comics 1966

[153] The ESQUIRE article would resonate with a generation of fans-turned-creators. When Lee was trying to recruit comix star Denis Kitchen, publisher of Kitchen Sink Comix, to head Marvel's ill-fated attempt to enter the countercultural comix scene, Kitchen explained "I was one of the college kids that was gobbling up your book when you were making the front cover of ESQUIRE and hypnotizing campuses." Lee, of course was not depicted or mentioned on the ESQUIRE cover, and is once again serving here in his familiar role as synecdoche for the entire Marvel corporation. (Denis Kitchen to Stan Lee, 9/12/72)

[154] Raphael and Spurgeon, 113

[155] "O.K., You Passed the 2-S Test – Now You're Smart Enough for Comic Books"

beers, speaking to Stan Lee. Stan Lee is a charismatic individual, and they had such great admiration for him. And he knew how to sell his concepts."[156]

It was on college campuses that Lee first began to see meaningful changes in the cultural standing of comics as a realistic possibility. This realization convinced him, at least for the time being, to concentrate on elevating the field rather than abandoning it. In 1968, Lee related an anecdote from an interview with a group of Princeton students several years earlier:

> And the first time they mentioned the three issues, they referred to them as 'The Galactus Trilogy,' you see…. Well, to me, these guys calling it the 'Galactus Trilogy' and getting a lot of fan mail in which it was referred to that way, I remember saying to Jack [Kirby] and Martin Goodman, 'I think we have finally made the first inroads in elevating the comics just a little bit. I think they're beginning to become a form of literature now, to some degree and hopefully we'll continue on that path.'[157]

Lee's campus visits also flattered his authorial ambitions. One Ivy League student told Lee, "We think of Marvel Comic as the twentieth-century mythology and you as this generation's Homer." Lee was also gratified by the intellectualism of Marvel's campus fans, explaining, "it always pleases me that the kids who talk to me about Marvel comics are the most articulate ones, not, as people imagine, slow learners or jocks."[158] An excerpt from The University of California at Berkeley *Pelican* which Lee happily reprinted declared, "Sartre, Camus, Marx, and Dostoevsky [are] being crowded off intellectual bookshelves to make way for SPIDER-MAN and the HULK. "[159]

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[156] Adam McGovern, "Marvel Man," *Kirby Collector* No. 41, TwoMorrows Publishing, pg 46

[157] Neal Conan interview

[158] Howard Kissel, "Comic Books: Not a Laughing Matter to Stan Lee," *Woman's Wear Daily*, Vol. 129 Iss. 100, 15 Nov. 1974, pg. 16

[159] Stan Lee, "The Black Panther!" *Fantastic Four* No. 52, Marvel Comics 1966

As students peppered Lee with questions regarding the religious, philosophical, and literary significance of his co-creations, the editor began to integrate the theoretical issues they raised into his own conception of the characters and the comic field as a whole. As Lee explained of his college tour, "all of a sudden I've learned that I have to become something of an amateur philosopher, myself, in order to have these little lectures."[160] By 1966, the university had become so central to Lee's life that he hired an agent to handle his increasingly busy college lecture schedule.

The 45-Year-Old and the Youth Culture

As campus visits allowed Lee to settle into his long-sought role of creative genius, he dramatically altered his appearance to match the voice he had developed in the pages of Marvel's comics. Lee had long understood the value of dressing to fit the authorial role he desired. A photo of the young Lee on the cover of the November 1947 issue of *Writer's Digest* depicted the editor as the quintessential staid intellectual, thoughtful gaze fixed on the reader as he contemplatively puffs on a pipe. The Stan Lee of the early '60s could have been confused with any of the other ad men or assorted executives in Manhattan – an early interviewer adroitly described him as "Madison-Avenue-ish in appearance,"[161] an observation a later interviewer reinforced and embellished, calling him "an ultra-Madison Avenue, rangy lookalike of Rex Harrison."[162] As his self-insert appearance in *Fantastic Four* #10 illustrated, this Lee was a clean-shaven, 40-something man in a suit and tie, his graying hairline rapidly receding. To anyone familiar with the Lee of later years, he is almost unrecognizable. In *Marvel Tales* #1 Lee and the

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[160] Neal Conan interview

[161] "Cub Scouts' Strip Rates Eagle Award; Interview with Stan Lee and Joe Maneely," *Editor & Publisher*, December 1957, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[162] Freeland

"Bullpen" finally answered the frequent requests of an emerging fan community by featuring photos of all of Marvel's staff. In his most widely seen public appearance to that time, Lee's picture features the editor clutching a cigar, a jauntily cocked trilby covering his expanding bald spot. The effect is of a man desperately affecting an outdated era's ideal of cool. In the early '70s, Lee remade his physical appearance. He sprouted a mustache and donned a wig. He adopted a new wardrobe, filled with frosted sunglasses, open-neck shirts, casual blazers, and silver jewelry. This change in appearance, which Lee retains to this day, came at the moment that he stepped back from writing and editing Marvel's comics to become a full-time college speaker and Hollywood wheeler-and-dealer. This was Stan Lee the pitchman, both hip and corny, icon of a youth culture of which he was far too old to be a part, cladding his trendiness in self-deprecation and irony in a successful attempt to fend off a sense of desperation or phoniness. The new-look Lee appeared in a promotional pamphlet featuring the editor as "Speaker-Man," a superhero guaranteed to enliven dull college lecture series. The piece proclaimed, "If your lecture program is in danger of being mired in a cultural wasteland, if students on your campus are tired of the same old speakers, then this is a job for Speaker-Man!"[163] Lee made the approach work in a way others couldn't. DC tried to emulate Lee's hip/corny tone and the results were embarrassing. An ad in early '70s DC comics featured Superman addressing the reader by proclaiming "Let' Rap!" and inquiring as to what the audience thought was "groovy."[164]

Despite the eagerness with which he embraced the fashion and language of the campus, Lee had little interest in the radical politics of many of his most devoted university fans. Lee was a firm believer in the liberal consensus and clung to that ideal even as it began to crumble on the very campuses on which he was so popular. His resolve to avoid any hint of radicalism was strengthened, of course, by his fear of

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[163] Speaker-Man Pamphlet, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[164] Keith Dallas and Jason Sacks, American Comic Book Chronicles: The 1970s, (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2014), pg 12

alienating readers. Lee's reluctance to take a controversial position on political issues was reflected in the pages of Marvel comics. In March of 1968, after endorsing a program that encouraged Americans to write to soldiers in Vietnam, Lee explained:

> Many of our politically aware readers have divergent opinions about the Vietnam War – as do the Bullpenners themselves. This notice is not intended as an endorsement on our part of any specific policy regarding the war. We simply feel that any American boys have been sent into battle far from home – and anything we can do to make 'em feel that they're not forgotten is surely a worthwhile deed which transcends mere politics. 'Nuff said![165]

In October 1967, Lee launched a poll on whether he should become more politically involved, writing, "Many Keepers of the Faith have demanded that we take a more definitive stand on current problems such as Vietnam, civil rights, and the increase in crime."[166] Lee never announced the results of the poll, but a year later he promised to address topical political issues more often.[167] Despite this promise, however, Lee remained hesitant to take any sort of controversial stand. As he told *Rolling Stone* in 1971, "I think the only message I have ever tried to get across is for Christsake, don't be bigoted. Don't be intolerant. If you're a radical, don't think that all conservatives have horns. Just like if you're a John Bircher, don't think that every radical wants to blow up the nation and rape your daughter."[168] This same desire to find a middle road regarding controversial issues found its way into the plots of the comics Lee helped create. As Sean Howe points out, when Lee depicted campus riots, the disruption to the normally

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[165] Stan Lee, "Where Soars the Silver Surfer!" *Fantastic Four* No. 72, Marvel Comics, 1968

[166] "When Opens the Cocoon!"

[167] Kasakove, pg. 135

[168] Robin Green, "Marvel Comics: Face Front," *Rolling Stone* No. 91, 16 September, 1971

calm status quo was the work of outside agitators, either the Kingpin (*Amazing Spider-Man* #68, Jan '69) or the giant floating head known as Modok (*Captain America* #120, Dec '69).[169]

Though Lee was unwilling to commit himself fully to the ideals of the counterculture, Marvel's popularity on college campuses inevitably linked it to the activism proliferating at American Universities. Such connections emerge with astounding force in the 1966 *Esquire* article. The magazine reimages several prominent campus radicals as Marvel-style heroes, explaining that while others "have quieted down since Berkeley…, Super-Student has majored in Power and he knows how to use it." Such Students are "running the show" with "college administrations… running scared." The following pages presented readers with favorable portraits of Barry Bluestone, "The Lone Labor Kid," who successfully organized student workers at the University of Michigan and "Good-Bye Girl" Nancy Steffen, whose *Stanford Daily* articles forced the University's Dean of Women to resign because she was trying to "foist Victorian standards on the hip, swinging Stanford campus."[170]

Not all of Lee's colleagues appreciated his new, hip image or the public role of creative genius and pop culture maestro that had prompted it. By 1972, Jack Kirby had left Marvel behind and returned to DC Comics. In the sixth issue of *Mister Miracle*, a book Kirby wrote and drew, we meet Funky Flashman, a savage and explicit parody of Lee. The hairless Funky begins the day by ostentatiously donning a wig and fake beard. He then insinuates himself into the company of heroic escape artist Mister Miracle, earning the role of business manager via a very familiar brand of patter. He promptly steals Miracle's property and, when confronted by the book's villains, distracts them by tossing them his faithful assistant Houseroy – a sniveling toady drawn to resemble Lee's assistant Roy Thomas – and makes good his escape.

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[169] Sean Howe, <u>Marvel The Untold Story</u>, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013)

[170] "Not All Your Supermen Are in the Funnies. Meet Super-Student!" *Esquire*, Sept. 1966, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

College campuses provided Lee with more than fans, legitimization, and media attention. They also served as a breeding ground for the next generation of comic creators, men and women who would labor to continue Lee's mission of uplift even as they alternatively validated and vilified Lee himself. Perhaps more importantly, Marvel's campus-based fandom would also produce filmmakers who understood and enjoyed comic books, who would see the source material as a model rather than a handicap. Michael Uslan, the young teacher who introduced Indiana University students to comic books in the country's first accredited course on the subject, purchased the film rights to Batman from DC in 1979 and spent the next several years trying to interest Hollywood in a dark, serious take on the character.[171] Uslan teamed with Peter Guber to make the film, but eventually found himself shoved aside by Guber and his partner Jon Peters as the pair seized credit for and control of what eventually became the 1989 *Batman* blockbuster.[172]

In the early '70s, Lee partnered with another such young man, Lloyd Kaufman, who was something of a prototype for the creators who would eventually shepherd Marvel's comic universe to other media. The pair teamed to produce *The Night of the Witch*, a screenplay they sold first to Cannon and, in 1979, offered to Sam Arkoff of American International Pictures (AIP).[173] Kaufman, who Lee called, "one of the many brilliant young students for whom Marvel Comics had become a sort of shrine," was a college student at Yale during the '60s. He was steeped in both high- and low-culture and approached both with a post-modern sensibility that did not devalue either. Kaufman describes the films that drew him to cinema: "*The Magnificent Ambersons*, *Sullivan's Travels*, and *The Searchers*, not to

[171] Ryan Mac, "Investing in Batman: 30 Years Later an Executive's Gamble on the Dark Knight Pays Off," *Forbes*, 14 July 2012, https://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanmac/2012/07/14/investing-in-batman-30-years-later-an-executives-gamble-on-the-dark-knight-pays-off/#21b1b9a8ed82

[172] Kim Masters, "Holy Lawsuit, 'Batman,'" *Washington Post*, 27 March 1992.

[173] Michael Herz, VP Troma Inc. to Sam Arkoff, American International Pictures, 5 July 1979, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

mention Stan Brakhage's overwhelming *Art of Vision* and Russ Meyer's *The Immoral Mr. Teas*"[174] – a mix of auteurist classics, Avant Garde experimentation, and the lowest of low-brow cinema. Kaufman brought this same post-modern disregard of cultural distinctions to his Marvel comic fandom.

In a process reminiscent of the Marvel Method, Lee dictated the story for *Night of the Witch* into a tape recorder and Kaufman turned the comic creator's ideas into a screenplay.[175] The script the two men produced together over the course of 1971 is a mixture of exploitation horror tropes and the moralistic social commentary Lee used for the screenplays he was producing with Alain Resnais during the same period. John Ward, an attractive young professor, is teaching a course at Salem College arguing that witches are a historical reality. Lee and Kaufman seem to be set on making a political statement as Ward explains, "Down through the ages, witches have been the most oppressed minority ever." In his next breath, however, Ward pronounces, "I would go so far as to compare the witch of 1789 to, say, a… hippie…" going on to liken "the plight of the witch" to "that group of kids last year who were driven off the farm they'd bought only five miles from here. All they wanted to do was to establish a commune and live according to their own beliefs."[176] Instead of an allegory for civil rights, Lee opts for a more apolitical but garishly unsubtle tale of youth culture oppressed by an unfeeling establishment.

The depiction of the town's elders makes the scripts anti-establishment leanings abundantly clear. Salem's civic leaders are the most cartoonish representatives of the establishment that Lee and Kaufman could devise – a cruel weapons manufacturer, a brutal police chief, the yellow journalist who runs the local paper. Though they neither understand or believe in it, this debauched assortment of squares decides to callously leverage the local witch tradition for profit by holding "the First Annual Salem Witch

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[174] Lloyd Kaufman, All I Need to Know About Filmmaking I Learned From The Toxic Avenger, (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc. 1998) pg. 22

[175] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 189

[176] Kaufman and Lee, pg 4

Folk-Rock Festival" aimed at "the youth market,"[177] an idea Ward vocally opposes as crude exploitation of a marginalized group: "It is an insult to those who work with the forces of nature… You and your festival are profaning all that is sacred to this tiny group of individuals. It's like money changers in the Temple to them."[178] The town council is unimpressed: "As long as we milk those littly [sic] snotty intellectuals, I'm happy!!"[179] As the celebration approaches, the odious city fathers are dispatched one-by-one in grizzly accidents – impaled on a gardener's weeder, neck broken by a falling window, ground to pieces by a printing press, head exploded by a malfunctioning walkie-talkie. It is eventually revealed that Ward is himself a witch, seeking to work the townsfolk into such a state of panic that they will recite a spell that will unwittingly place them in his thrall.

Night of the Witch, written at the height of Lee's college tours with one of the young men he had met on campus, can be read as a celebration of Marvel's university-bound popularity and an attack on older readers who dismissed the medium. In a line that could refer to Marvel as much as to witchcraft, one of the city elders laughingly proclaims, "The spooky-wooky is pretty big today. Why, there was this article in the *Wall Street Journal* last week 'bout how kids are buying up incense, hex signs, and who knows what."[180] Gilbert, the local newspaper editor, promises to heavily publicize the "witch" culture which the screenplay presents as an authentic manifestation of youth culture. "The grown ups'll think it's campy,"[181] he sneers, invoking the same camp sensibility which had become linked to comic books in the wake of the live-action Batman TV show's success.

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[177] Kaufman and Lee, pg 17

[178] Kaufman and Lee, pg 55

[179] Kaufman and Lee, pg 39

[180] Kaufman and Lee, pg 17

[181] Kaufman and Lee, pg 20

In the years following Kaufman's graduation, Lee's influence on the young filmmaker became clear. Kaufman and Lee collaborated on several more film pitches, none of which would ever be produced. Lee served as an informal advisor on one of Kaufman's earliest films, the sex comedy *Squeeze Play*.[182] After *Squeeze Play* proved a minor hit, Kaufman founded his own exploitation film production company, Troma. Troma's New York-based studio would find success churning out gore-and-grime drenched genre films with ostentatious social consciences. Kaufman remained intrigued by the central premise of *Night of the Witch* – a relatable slasher who elicited audience sympathy as he dispatched unsavory members of a corrupt establishment – and would use it as the basis for Troma's most famous film, *The Toxic Avenger*.[183] The twisted mash-up of superhero and horror tropes would prove a cult success, and the protagonist Toxie would briefly enjoy his own Marvel comic series. In the '90s, Kaufman and Lee would collaborate on another unproduced script, this time for a superhero named Congress-Man.[184]

In key ways, Troma served as an example of what a studio heavily influenced by Marvel would look like decades before the publisher influenced Hollywood to remake itself in the comic industry's image, adopting poetics and creative practices based on the once marginalized cultural form. Troma followed *The Toxic Avenger* with a string of gross-out epics including *Troma's War*, *Sgt. Kabukiman NYPD*, and *Tromeo & Juliet*, all united in a single, albeit loosely organized, cinematic universe. Kaufman modeled the storyverse he was creating, Tromaville, on the expansive, realistic-yet-extraordinary world which Lee and his collaborators had built in comics during the '60s. Troma developed a distinct house style and standardized numerous aspects of film production, and Kaufman assumed a combined managerial/ creative role somewhat akin to Lee's – or the producers of the classic Hollywood system –

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[182] Lee to Kaufman, 8/21/1979, Stan Lee Collection, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[183] Kaufman

[184] Kaufman

that saw him intimately involved with every production, often writing and directing them himself.[185] It is no coincidence that Troma served as the training ground for a young director and screenwriter named James Gunn, who moved into the world of blockbuster filmmaking in 2014 by writing and directing Marvel's wildly successful *Guardians of the Galaxy*. His experience in the Troma system prepared him well for the Marvel Studio system of the 21st century. Kaufman himself has a brief cameo in the first film in the series.

As Lee and Kaufman wrote *Night of the Witch*, Martin Goodman sought to leverage Marvel's association with the coveted youth market by licensing the publisher's properties to a producer from the fringes of the entertainment industry, Steve Lemberg. Lemberg was a strange choice to shepherd Marvel's intellectual properties to other media, having worked as a record producer and song writer who authored tunes including Merle Hagard's "Here Comes the Freedom Train." Lemberg was shocked by how little Goodman valued his comic book properties - for the rights to every character in Marvel's universe, Goodman charged the record producer an initial price of $2,500, allowed him to renew the agreement indefinitely, and gave himcomplete, exclusive control of all the Marvel Universe characters.[186]

Lemberg sought to draw on his music industry experience and appeal to Marvel's campus fans with a variety of ham-handed Rock 'n' Roll oriented projects. Finalizing the deal in 1971, Lemberg announced he would seek to adapt Marvel's comics, "into audio-visual and live performance media with a strong accent on music."[187] Lemberg's first idea was to serialize Marvel stories into 65 five-minute chapters that could be sold to rock 'n'roll radio stations, the first series featuring the Mighty Thor.[188]

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[185] Kaufman

[186] Howe

[187] "Marvel Comics to Go Audiovisual; Music Accented," *Billboard* vol. 83 iss. 42, 16 Oct. 1971, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[188] Lemberg obviously felt this project would prove wildly successful, planning subsequent serializations of Spider-Man, Daredevil, Iron Man, Fantastic Four, Silver Surfer, and Dr. Doom stories.

Lemberg then partnered with Buddha Records to produce what he hoped would be the first of a series of Marvel rock opera record albums. *Spider-Man: Rock Reflections of a Super-Hero* assured potential customers it was an authentic product by noting on the cover that it featured narration from Stan Lee. The record featured timeless tracks like "No One's Got a Crush on Peter" and "A Soldier Starts to Bleed," but failed to find an audience. Lemberg also tried and failed to negotiate production of a Marvel-themed television Christmas special.[189] With the help of Motown's Berry Gordy, Lemberg set up a number of meetings with major studios, but the promoter was unable to make any headway in selling Marvel's heroes. Hollywood was not interested in the sort of niche-oriented, genre-heavy material Marvel produced, and the state of special effects at the time meant the films would be prohibitively expensive in any case.[190]

The logic of marrying Marvel and Rock in a potent youth-culture cocktail did not die after Marvel's IPs were wrenched from Lemberg in 1973. Shortly after retrieving the rights to Spider-Man, Lee and his partners from the *Marvel Super Heroes* animated series launched a more ambitious plan then even Lemberg could have dreamed of. Lee, Steve Krantz, and Bob Lawrence set out to make a blockbuster Spider-Man film musical starring Elton John or Mick Jagger. [191] When Lee expressed trepidation at fan reactions to a rock star donning the red-and-blue tights, Krantz quieted his fears; "we will undoubtedly have the most orthodox complain bitterly about the casting, even if we played it as a

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"Marvel Comics to Go Audiovisual; Music Accented,"

[189] Marvel Comics Group, Marketing Objectives, 1973, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[190] Steve Krantz to Stan Lee, 17 Dec. 1975, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[191] In the late '70s, Marvel was working to bring several other heroes to the Broadway stage in more traditional musicals. Captain America, written and co-produced by Mel Mandel, got the farthest. Marvel also worked with Steve Leber to develop an original superhero for the musical stage. (Television and Feature Films, 7/18/1979, Stan Lee Collection)

straight action adventure. In any event, you can always tell your readers that it was Bob Lawrence's fault."[192] Krantz soon secured the talents of Sterling Silliphant, recipient of an Oscar for his *In the Heat of the Night* screenplay, to write the script, but the project gradually faded from sight. Lee and Krantz also discussed a Thor musical, *Ragnarok*, conceived in the image of *Tommy* or *Godspell*, with Cashman & West or one of Don Kirshner's "people" providing the music.[193] The project eventually moved forward with producer Michael Butler, the man who had helped bring *Hair* to Broadway, but it never reached the stage.[194]

Lemberg's crowning achievement as the holder of Marvel's IP licenses came on January 5, 1972. The promoter arranged an engagement which would mark both the high and low point of Stan Lee's public speaking career; Stan was going to play Carnegie Hall. Lemberg hoped to position Lee as Marvel's most important character, and the Carnegie Hall engagement was a key part of Lemberg's plan to drum up media interest in Marvel and make Hollywood take notice. The $25,000 show was an ungainly assemblage of Lee telling stories, Roy Thomas's rock band playing, a jazz set by Chico Hamilton, and various Marvel staffers dressed as the company's characters. An eclectic collection of celebrities, including Robert-Altman-regular Rene Auberjonois and Tom Wolfe, performed dramatic readings of Lee's prose. The evening was the physical manifestation of Marvel's conflicted cultural position, mixing the sophistication of Wolfe, Auberjonois, and a dramatic poem Lee had authored entitled "God Woke" with the kid's stuff of a lycra-clad Spider-Man bounding aimlessly about the stage and an appearance by the world's tallest man. The show was a colossal disaster and the media took little notice.

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[192] Krantz to Lee

[193] Steve Krantz to Stan Lee, 4 Feb. 1976, Stan Lee Collection Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[194] Steve Krantz to Stan Lee, 17 March 1976, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Despite the failure of the evening, the fact that Lemberg even considered making Lee the center of a performance at Carnegie hall was a testament to the power of the authorial persona that the editor had spent the decade creating. Lee had developed this persona in the paratext of Marvel comics and adapted it based on his extensive experiences on college campuses. Using this persona, Lee had become the dominant creative personality in Marvel's comics, eclipsing the importance of his collaborators even as he continued to credit and promote them. Lee's public role as Marvel's spokesperson had begun to obscure the industrial reality of comic book production.

In the early '70s, Lee entered a remarkable creative partnership with French New Wave filmmaker Alain Resnais, one of the guest performers in the disastrous Carnegie Hall show. Lee's involvement with one of the leading representatives of the auteurist movement offers the opportunity to consider the Marvel Revolution in relation to other, contemporary artistic movements marked by changing ideas about authorship. Lee's attitude towards his partnership with Resnais and the film proposals it produced serves to further illustrate the conflict at the core of Lee's approach to authorship, as he both longed for recognition as an individual and preferred to be part of a collaborative creative process. Lee's work with Resnais would also highlight the degree to which Lee relied on the use of both character-based and socially relevant realism to raise the cultural standing of the material he wrote and justify his own authorial position.

Chapter 2

<u>New Waves</u>

Marvel's new approach to comic book storytelling was far from the only artistic revolution taking place in the '60s and early '70s. In a number of other fields of cultural production creators were tapping into the youthful, rebellious spirit of the age and challenging what they believed to be stodgy conventions that were inhibiting the growth of the medium. Placing the Marvel Revolution in conversation with related artistic movements in the fields of film and science-fiction literature allows us to better understand Lee's own attitudes towards authorship. The New Waves in science fiction and film, like the Marvel Revolution, linked their challenge to the established artistic order with an attempt to elevate the cultural standing of their media through the celebration of the creator as romantic author. The Marvel Revolution differed from these other, contemporaneous artistic developments in one key respect: both the French and science fiction New Waves had a pronounced, often radical, political dimension while Lee attempted to keep Marvel's comics firmly within the Cold War liberal consensus.

The links between the French New Wave, the science fiction New Wave, and the Marvel Revolution were more than theoretical; Stan Lee had personal connections with both movements. Perhaps most remarkably, Lee and New Wave auteur Alain Resnais became lifelong friends in the late 1960s and collaborated on several projects. Together, they produced proposals for two films, *The Monster Makers* and *The Inmates*. In these works, Lee further refined his authorial persona and his approach to storytelling. In particular, both proposals highlight Lee's reliance on character-based realism and a bombastic, largely apolitical form of humanistic moralizing to create the impression of social relevance and lend weight to material that might otherwise seem absurd or meaningless.

The Monster Makers stands as the comic creators most in-depth meditation on the nature of authorship. The story Lee produced was a defense of the industrial creative production as embodied by the classic studio system. Even as Lee's script argues for the cultural value of the process of collaborative creation, it also positions the studio's producer as a romantic genius, the studio's standardized output a product of his unique subjectivity and concerns. The script is essentially a formal declaration of the mission Lee had undertaken beginning in the early '60s: to position the overseer of a factory-like creative process, whether editor or producer, as the author figure of all of that process' output. It models an authorial situation akin to the one Marvel Studios would adopt in the 21st century, with Lee ensconced as the author figure for all of the company's films.

Stan and Alain

In 1970, Lee was once again growing dissatisfied at Marvel. The industry's brief moment in the spotlight was well in the past by the end of the '60s. Lee was still happily touring college campuses, but the media attention had dried up. Superhero comics were once more out of fashion, and it seemed like the innovations Lee and his colleagues had brought to the genre might come to naught. Lee's relationships with his collaborators, rocky at the best of times, were beginning to appear irreparably broken. What's more, in 1968 sales had dipped and Martin Goodman had toyed with cutting expenses, bringing to Lee's mind images of the mass lay-offs in 1957, a memory that still troubled the editor, who deeply disliked having to fire his collaborators.[195] The comic industry, seemingly stable and on the rise during the middle of the decade, appeared to be doomed once more.

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[195] American Comic Book Chronicles: 1965-69

As Lee cast about for possible alternative employment, a very unexpected possibility emerged, courtesy of the European art cinema. Over the course of the '60s, Lee's comic work had occasionally put him in a position to brush elbows with the new breed of European auteurs that had emerged in the years following World War II. Italian director Federico Fellini had paid Marvel's office a visit in 1965, a fact Lee giddily related in that month's Bulletins, emphasizing how such connections boosted the medium's cultural status: "World famous movie writer/director Federico Fellini, stopped in to visit the gang at the bullpen last November… we spent a wonderful couple of hours showing him around and swapping stories! So, the next time someone gives you a disdainful look when you mention being a Marvel Marcher, you might just casually mention the kinda company you're in!"[196] Lee embellished the story more in a *New York Herald Tribune* interview: "He's my buddy now," says Lee. "He invited me to come to see him at his villa any time I'm in Rome. I'm supposed to take him to the cartoonists' convention when he's back here for the *Sweet Charity* opening in January." The *Herald Tribune* reporter, who placed the anecdote at the article's opening as an explanation for why an otherwise tasteful publication would interview a comic book editor, felt compelled to inform incredulous readers that "No, it wasn't a put-on."[197] Lee would be gleefully recounting his visit from Fellini for well over a decade, brandishing the memory as a mark of his own cultural standing.

Lee's relationship with French New Wave filmmaker Alain Resnais amounted to far more than a quick tour of the Marvel offices. Lee could sometimes exaggerate his relationship with prominent men and women in the hopes of basking in reflected attention and respectability (his tales of Fellini serve as a ready example), and he certainly enjoyed being associated with one of the world's most respected filmmakers. In the Bulletins in Marvel comics cover-dated March 1970, Lee happily related that,

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[196] "This Man… This Monster!"

[197] Freeland

"according to Alain, Marvel Comics are definitely the 'in' thing in the arty circles of Europe today."[198] Yet beyond his usual hyperbole, Lee's friendship with Resnais was genuine and mutual and lasted for the remainder of the two men's lives. It would be Lee's long, close relationship with Resnais that would inspire his most intriguing attempts at screenwriting and his most articulate defense of his own approach to authorship.

The two men met around 1969. Resnais was in the midst of an extended break from directing, spending 18 months in the US. During this period he began numerous projects, his collaborations with Lee chief among them. None of these planned films, including a movie about the Marquis de Sade and a documentary on H.P. Lovecraft to be produced by William Friedkin, would ever come to fruition.[199] Resnais, a dedicated fan of comics in general and Lee's writing in particular, sought the editor out. Resnais explained, "I had read everything he had written for the last ten years. I was totally hooked, and I was surprised to find that the writer was such a lovable person. He told me that he has written more than 7000 stories, and would like to try something else."[200] The result of the collaboration would be proposals for two films, a full screenplay entitled *The Monster Maker* and a synopsis for a project known as *The Inmates*. In the end, the only completed product of their collaborations was *The Year 01* (1973), a Resnais-directed film for which Lee provided narration.

Resnais embodied many of the values of the New Wave, a filmmaking movement which emerged in France in the late 1950s, crested in 1959 and 1960, and was fading away by 1963. The New Wave was largely a reaction to a widespread sense, both inside and outside the French film industry, that the national cinema had lost its way. French cinema was awash in the rote drudgery of "tradition of quality" films, a

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[198] Stan Lee, "The Mad Thinker and his Androids of Death!" *Fantastic Four* No. 96, Marvel Comics 1970

[199] G.Y. Dryanksky, "Belmondo's Stavisky – A Crook with Charm," *Women's Wear Daily* Vol. 128 Iss. 45, 6 March 1974, pg. 72

[200] Phil Patton and Sharon Shurts, "Alain Resnais: From Marienbad to the Bronx," *The Harvard Crimson*, 12 April 1972

swamp of punishingly "respectable" literary adaptations. In response to the stultifying mainstream of French filmmaking, a group of directors including Claude Chabrol, Francois Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard began producing films that seemed aggressively new and urgent, shot on shoe-string budgets without established stars, set on the streets of contemporary Paris, and focused on complexly realized young characters struggling with problems with which a youthful middle-class audience could easily identify.[201]

Despite their wildly different place in the cultural hierarchy, there were similarities between the New Wave and the roughly contemporaneous Marvel Revolution. Both sought to rescue moribund media that had become lost in a wilderness of familiar and banal tropes by refocusing stories on relatable young people with problems familiar to audiences. In pursuit of this goal, both movements employed a powerful visual style that rivals viewed as absurdly primitive. The key similarity, however, is that both movements sought to use the assertion of romantic authorship as a tool to raise the cultural standing of their medium. Andrew Bennett, drawing on scholars Thomas Inge and Timothy Corrigan, writes, "to put it simply, while film emerged in the early twentieth century as a commercial and collaborative medium, in order to be taken seriously as an art, alongside literature and the visual arts, it needed its own version of the myth of the solitary genius."[202] Lee and the New Wave auteurists were engaged in a mission to convince critics that their mediums could express authorial subjectivity just as well as literature or the visual arts.

The young filmmakers of the New Wave demonstrated a widespread affinity for the cheap serialized literature that was the close relation of the comics Marvel produced. Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* and Godard's *Breathless*, both released in 1960, were adaptations of pulp-fiction novels. In fact,

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[201] Richard Neupert, <u>A History of the French New Wave Cinema</u>, (University of Wisconsin Press, 2007)

[202] Andrew Bennet, The Author, (New York: Routledge, 2005) pg 105

Marvel's place in the pop culture firmament had already earned it an appearance in a New Wave director's feature years before Lee ever met Resnais - images depicting Captain America and Nick Fury taken from the back of the packaging of the earliest Marvel action figures appeared as part of a montage in Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 *La Chiniose*. Godard, of course, was not as enamored by the comic publisher as Resnais and used the image as part of a commentary on American imperialism.

Resnais had always been even more drawn to cheap literature in general and comic books in particular then his contemporaries. Due to periodic asthma attacks, the future filmmaker received portions of his education at home, during which he found time to become immersed in a variety of types of literature ranging from comic books to the works of Marcel Proust.[203] He told the New York times that he had been, "reading pulps, comic books – French and American – since 1936. Especially the strange, fantastic things that Stan Lee has done."[204] Prior to filming *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), Resnais had attempted to adapt the Tin Tin story *The Black Island*.[205]

Comic books had a clear impact on Resnais' filmmaking. The director revealed to interviewers that a technique he had employed in *Muriel, or The Time of Return* (1963) in which dialogue from one scene overlapped into the next had been inspired by comic books. Similarly, Resnais explained that the disorienting, dream-like action in *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) was partially based on the comic *Mandrake the Magician*. In 1972, writers at *The Harvard Crimson* saw a further connection: "More generally, comics encourage a non-linear, non-chronological kind of reading, a sense of the story as being all-present. In this way, comics are a possible source for the single most remarkable characteristic of

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[203] Neupert 13

[204] A.H. Weiler, "Alain Resnais: La Garbage Est Finie?," *New York Times*, 2 May 1971, pg d11

[205] Brian Cronin, Comic Book Legends Revealed #222, 27 Aug. 2009, *Comic Book Resources*, http://www.cbr.com/comic-book-legends-revealed-222/

Resnais' style--the handling of time."[206] One can certainly see the influence of comics on the short documentaries with which Resnais began his career, stories of artists told via a series of still images set to voice-over narration. The director's camera moves across the images, fading from one illustration to the next, creating an effect is akin to that of reading a comic book.

In the years leading up to his collaboration with Lee Resnais was beginning to experiment with genres traditionally eschewed by art cinema filmmakers. As he related to the *Los Angeles Times*, his filmmaking was heavily influenced by the first three films he ever saw, one of which was a science fiction feature.[207] The last film Resnais completed before meeting Lee was *Je T'Aime, Je T'Aime* (1968), in which the filmmaker explored his usual concerns with memory and reality and the filmic expression of time in a sci-fi framework that sees a suicidal man volunteer for a time-travel experiment.

<u>The Auteur</u>

At the heart of the New Wave was a belief in the romantic genius of the auteur which would deeply inform Lee's *The Monster Makers*. Many of the most prominent New Wave filmmakers had begun their careers as critics at *Cahiers du Cinema*. At the journal, a group of young writers – Godard, Chabrol, and Truffaut among them – were able to apply traditional notions of the romantic author to the cinema and develop a new approach to criticism and filmmaking. For these young auteurists, truly great filmmaking was not the collaborative product of an ingenious system but an act of "individual self-expression," the authentic reflection of the director's personality and inner life. As stated by Alexandre Astruc, one of the forerunners of the movement, in his seminal "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La

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206 Patton and Shurts

207 Mary Blume, "Resnais Opens Old Wound," *Los Angeles Times*, 5/11/1974, pg. a10

Camera-Stylo," "the cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression," a space where directors can and should "translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel."[208] Great directors would inevitably produce films which expressed his deepest subjectivity, and the director's personality and beliefs would thus serve to link all of his films via a system of shared beliefs and practices. Those filmmakers incapable or unwilling of producing such expressions of interiority were matteur en scenes, mere craftsmen, regardless of their proficiency at the technical aspects of filmmaking.[209]

The *Cahiers* critics were particularly drawn to American cinema, where they were certain the genius of directors like Hitchcock and Ford had been buried by the regimentation of the studio system. The marks of romantic authorship remained, but they had to be unearthed from the narrative or aesthetic of the film. The implication was clear and often explicit; the American author had to be rescued from the weight of collaboration, from the crushing force of the industry and its production line.

Resnais had a slightly different background and approach to filmmaking then many of his New Wave colleagues. Resnais was not a member of the small gaggle of directors associated with *Cahiers du Cinema*, instead being part of what Richard Neupert describes as a "subgroup" associated with the auteurist movement known as the Left Bank Group. If it is surprising to think of Lee in association with the New Wave, it may be even more shocking to think of him in connection with the Left Bank Group, which was more political and more visually experimental then their *Cahiers* counterparts. Neupert describes Resnais' filmmaking as tending towards "rigorous formal experimentation" rather than the "playful, genre-influenced" work of the Cahiers crew.[210]

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[208] Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo," *New Wave Film*, http://www.newwavefilm.com/about/camera-stylo-astruc.shtml

[209] John Caughie, "Introduction," Theories of Authorship, ed. John Caughie, (London: Routledge, 1981) pg 9

[210] Neupert

Resnais' partnership with Lee was predicated on a fundamental difference of opinion between the filmmaker and his New Wave contemporaries. Many of Resnais' contemporaries firmly believed that a director must write his own scripts to ensure the integrity of a film. An independent scripter was an impediment to the director's expression of self that was likely to mar the subject matter beyond recovery. Astruc contended that the age of the camera-stylo meant, "that the scriptwriter ceases to exist, for in this kind of film-making the distinction between author and director loses all meaning."[211] Much of Truffaut's criticism of "tradition of quality" cinema in the landmark "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" centered around an assault on what he labeled "scriptwriter's films," pictures in which the director was reduced to the role of a matteur en scene, shooting another author's creative work. The result, says Truffaut, is "profanation and blasphemy."[212]

Resnais took a far less strident attitude towards collaboration then many of his New Wave colleagues and was skeptical of many of the more extreme manifestations of auteurism. Telling an interviewer, "I should not be considered a struggling auteur; St. Resnais the martyr does not exist," he explained that his first feature length film *Hiroshima, mon amour* was not a personal idea but rather a commissioned work, suggested by producers seeking a follow-up to his short concerning the Holocaust, *Night and Fog* (1956).[213] Demonstrating an appreciation of collaboration, Resnais always worked with a screenwriter, producing films that attempted to highlight two individual voices in what has been called a "dual-auteur" system. Discussing *Hiroshima, mon amour*, one critic commented, "The most original aspect may be this: The two authors said what they wanted simultaneously in images and speech."[214]

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[211] Astruc

[212] Francois Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," *New Wave Film*, http://www.newwavefilm.com/about/a-certain-tendency-of-french-cinema-truffaut.shtml

[213] Neupert 13

[214] Bernard Pingaud, "A propos de Hiroshima mon amour," in Neupert

Lee shared surprising similarities to several of Resnais' other collaborators such as writer Alain Robbe-Grillet. In making *Last Year at Marienbad*, Resnais worked with Robbe-Grillet, one of the innovators of the New Novel, a movement that developed in mid-50s France and attempted to shake up the traditions of French literature as aggressively as the New Wave did those of French film. It sought "new modes of representation for a new generation,"[215] and worked to adapt the novel form to the tastes of a vibrant youth culture. The practitioners of the New Novel approach were far more stylistically radical within their medium than Lee would ever dream of being. When compared to the staid respectability of traditional French (or American) literature, however, the self-aware candy-colored bombast of Lee and his collaborators could seem stylistically deviant indeed. In addition, like Marvel, the New Novel gained a large part of its audience and cultural cachet from college campuses, benefitting from the dramatic increase in the number of college students and the media's inordinate interest in their activities. Indeed, the similarities between Lee and Robbe-Grillet go deeper still: both men held management roles in their respective publishing companies, Robbe-Grillet serving as literary advisor for the small publishing house Editions de Miuit's; both became faces for their respective media through a deft hand at self-promotion; and both made themselves known personally on campuses via extensive touring.

Resnais and Robbe-Grillet emphasized the shared control and divergent voices of the "dual auteur" method by offering contradictory answers to questions about their film, *Last Year at Marienbad*, one proclaiming that the picture's central couple had certainly met the year before, the other declaring with equal authority that such a meeting was an impossibility.[216] Critics initially emphasized the nearly

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[215] Neupert 13

[216] Neupert 316

equal contributions of the two men, but as time passed the need to fit the picture into the mold of auteurist cinema led to the gradual disappearance of the contribution of Robbe-Grillet.

Though Resnais sporadically consulted with his scriptwriters as they wrote, he requested that his writer-partners undertake the construction of the script with as little consideration for him as possible. Jean Douchet explains, "Resnais pretended to obliterate himself behind these writers and requested that they create a narrative object that he could explore with his camera."[217] Writing was the job of the writer. Lee was not particularly enthusiastic about the labor Resnais' duel-auteurist system would require. The comic creator had become used to the collaborative Marvel Method and sought to replicate the process in film, producing a script through close, frequent interaction with other artists. Amazingly, even as he considered abandoning the comic field, he was intent on bringing his creative partners with him. As he told Resnais regarding artists Jack Kirby and John Buscema during the lead-up to production on *The Monster Makers*, "The thing is, these men are so talented that I think if I do movie work, I could take them with me. Jack is great at set design and things like that. And they're good at storyboards."[218]

Linked to Lee's fondness for collaboration was a distaste for spending long periods writing alone. "Almost everything I've ever written, I could finish at one sitting. I'm a fast writer. Maybe not the best, but the fastest. Writing is a lonely thing, so I try to get finished with it as soon as possible."[219] Still, Resnais would not be deterred, as Lee explained to producer Steve Krantz regarding *The Inmates*: "Personally, I'd like to sell the treatment (when complete) for lots of money and a percentage, and have someone else do the screenplay, although Alain says he'd prefer me to write it."[220]

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[217] Jean Douchet, <u>French New Wave</u>, (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1999) pg 190

[218] Sean Howe, 16 September 2015, *The Untold Story*, http://seanhowe.tumblr.com/post/129198609107/in-1969-stan-lee-was-feeling-restless-i-cant

[219] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 27

[220] Stan Lee to Steve Krantz, 7/2/76, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Lee's distaste for screenwriting would continue for years. This is made clear in a letter from Steve Krantz to Lee, in which the producer proposed a partnership to the comic creator:

> I mentioned to you in passing that I would like to make a long term relationship with you for the production of features and television. I would hope that your function in both areas would be coming up with ideas and working out a story and/ or treatment…. Just the ideas themselves would really not be sufficient, and I know how much you hate to write, but the problem of getting someone to translate your ideas into a story outline or treatment would be enormously cumbersome, chancy and expensive. I am not making any mention of your writing screenplays, not because I would not like that to happen, but principally because I don't think you want to spend that kind of time. If I am wrong, please make the appropriate correction.[221]

The Monster Makers

Despite the 1974 claim, "I've written a lot of screenplays. They come easily to me,"[222] *The Monster Makers* is the only complete film script Lee ever authored in a lifetime producing outlines, sketches, and other brief film proposals. In fact, given the endurance of the Marvel Method after 1961, it is one of very few complete scripts he wrote after the age of 40. *The Monster Makers* remains Lee's deepest rumination on his own work and its social role, a strikingly defensive allegory for his creativity in a marginalized artistic field. The choice of subject matter was Lee's alone – Resnais was initially

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[221] Steve Krantz to Stan Lee, 12/17/1975, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[222] Kissell 16

reluctant to make a film about a filmmaker.[223] It is apparent that Lee took the New Wave's fondness for profound self-expression through their art very much to heart as he wrote the screenplay.

The script follows Larry Morgan, a Bronx-based producer of schlock horror cinema with titles like "The Swamp-Crawler Strikes" and "The Lair of the Lizard Man." Lee is not shy about making the connection between Larry's life and his own explicit. Simply by placing the studio in the relatively unlikely environs of New York, rather than Hollywood, Lee announces Larry's enterprise as a thinly veiled allegory for the Gotham-based Marvel. The script is full of characters named after figures from Lee's own life: lead character Larry shares a name with Lee's brother Larry Lieber, who wrote many of the early Marvel Age comics and who provided the art for the Stan Lee-written Spider-Man newspaper comic for several decades, while Larry's faithful director Romita is named after John Romita Sr., one of Marvel's most reliable collaborators. It was Romita who replaced Ditko as *Spider-Man*'s artist in 1966 and, in concert with Lee, made the book Marvel's top seller and the character Marvel's most recognizable star. Perhaps more importantly, Lee's relationship with Romita was one of the only largely conflict-free collaborations with an artist that he ever enjoyed.[224] Romita, unlike Ditko and Kirby, was willing to assume a seemingly subservient role in the relationship, even while he quickly came to exert as much artistic influence on the character as either. Lee's perception of Romita seems to be reflected in the *Monster Makers*' character of the competent, workmanlike director who doesn't seek to challenge Larry's role as auteur or his budding relationship with Pat. Romita, a potential love-rival for protagonist Larry, obligingly disappears half way through the screenplay.[225]

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[223] James Monaco, <u>Alain Resnais</u>, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) pg 166

[224] Lee and Romita did not always agree – in the '70s the pair were developing a comic strip for Playboy Magazine. When the editors requested more S&M in the story, Lee was willing to comply but Romita balked. The strength of their relationship was quickly reaffirmed, however, when Lee agreed to walk away from the project in solidarity with the artist.

[225] Stan Lee, <u>The Monster Makers</u>, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

In interviews, Lee accurately described Larry as "a frustrated movie producer,"[226] a description that heightens his connection to Lee still further. The late '60s marked a nadir in Lee's fondness for the comic industry. In a 1969 conversation with Resnais, Lee grumbled, "I can't understand people who read comics! I wouldn't read them if I had the time and wasn't in the business," going on to mention that he was eager to write a screenplay, a play, a book of poems – anything but more comics.[227] We can hear this frustration as Larry regretfully reflects on a life that sounds very much like Lee's own:

> LARRY: I never really got what I wanted as a kid, in school, in the army. Then, even when I became a producer, my own boss, nothing really changed.
>
> PAT: Changed?
>
> LARRY: I never felt as though I had made it. I still wasn't doing the kind of pictures people respected.[228]

The film features sequences taken straight from Lee's own life – or at the very least, from anecdotes he was fond of relating. One such sequence sees Larry mingling awkwardly at a cocktail party thrown by his ex-wife's university. Morgan finds himself cornered by his former father-in-law Reynolds and a passing guest:

> WOMAN: Pardon me. I couldn't help overhearing. Are you really a film-maker?
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> LARRY: (uninterested) A producer.
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> REYNOLDS: (jovially) He certainly is.

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[226] Weiler d11

[227] Sean Howe, *The Untold Story,* 16 Sept. 2015, http://seanhowe.tumblr.com/post/129198609107/in-1969-stan-lee-was-feeling-restless-i-cant

[228] The Monster Makers

WOMAN: How exciting. What films do you produce?

LARRY: Horror stories.

REYNOLDS: You've heard of Larry Morgan, the monarch of the monster movies!

WOMAN: (her enthusiasm waning) Oh yes—of course.

[There is an awkward pause of a second or two. Then, the woman tries to make a graceful retreat. She's no longer interested in Larry.]

WOMAN: I must remember to tell my children that I met you.[229]

The sequence is almost a direct retelling of one Lee retold frequently, discussed in the first chapter, which he used to illustrate his shame and dissatisfaction at being a member of the despised comic industry.

The film is essentially the story of a dissatisfied auteur struggling to express himself through his art. It is one of the central oddities of the script that the auteur is not a director, writer, or star but rather a producer, a manager who rallies collaborators much as Lee did as editor at Marvel. In fact, Morgan's studio bears far more of a resemblance to the classical Hollywood studio system that had disintegrated in the '40s and '50s than anything that existed as Lee wrote his script. Like Larry's studio, classical Hollywood relied upon a collection of creative personnel, employed under contract and performing clearly specified and delimited tasks, working in close collaboration to churn out a steady stream of stylistically consistent product. Organizing and managing the entire process was the producer, figures like Irving Thalberg or David O. Selznik – or Larry Morgan. Throughout Lee's script, the studio's creative personnel repeatedly remind us of their subservience to Larry. Pat tells Larry, "You're a big, bright movie mogul and I'm just a hired hand—" Later, an angry Larry tells his writer and director"Let's

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[229] The Monster Makers

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remember who's boss here. I'm the one who foots the bills, and I'm the one who tells how it's gonna be."[230] In neither of these sequences is Larry depicted as malevolent or incorrect.

In his creative collaboration with one of the directors most connected to the auteurist movement, Lee wrote a celebration of the very system that the auteurists loathed, translating many of the characteristics of the romantic author onto the prime representative of that system, the producer. While some auteurist outlets, particularly the English journal *Movie*, adapted auteur theory in order to allow other members of a production – star, screenwriter, etc. – to be credited as the dominant author of a work, such a designation was rarely attributed to a producer.[231] There are a number of difficulties with the idea of the producer-as-auteur, of course, not the least of which is that auteurism, particularly in its later manifestations, generally assumes the director's soul must be excavated from the place it has been buried by the interference of corporate executives and the larger mode of corporate production. The conflict between the roles of producer and auteur was a contradiction that also lay deep at the heart of Lee's role at Marvel, where he was not only a writer but the individual who constrained the creative tendencies of other writers, maintaining the publisher's "bounds of difference." It was Lee who ordered Kirby to redraw portions of an artist's work on a story he found unsatisfactory, who clashed with Jim Steranko over the artist's experimental panel-layouts, who ordered Roy Thomas and other writers not to put the company's characters through any meaningful process of growth or change. He was, to an auteurist reading, the weight that forced the artist's soul into the gaps of the work.

In *The Monster Makers* Lee works his way around this issue by making it the producer, rather than the writer or director, whose desire for individual expression is constrained by outside, often corporate, forces. Larry's accountant enters and exits the picture repeatedly merely to remind the

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[230] The Monster Makers

[231] Caughie 13

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producer that there is an economic imperative to keep producing schlock. A late scene with Larry's banker and former father-in-law exists to demonstrate Morgan's inability to get funding for anything outside of his traditional genre. Perhaps most absurdly, the actor Steven Cavanaugh becomes the ultimate arbiter of what sort of film Larry will produce when he repeatedly threatens suicide or violence should the producer deviate from his creative demands. Much of the screenplay is taken up with demonstrations of Morgan's ultimate powerlessness.[232]

While the heart of the film is Larry's artistic struggles, its ostensible central theme is ecology. Lee would return to environmental issues again and again in his attempts to sell projects to other media; the topic offered the editor a way to be socially relevant while still staying largely apolitical. Lee broadcasts his ecological concerns to the audience from the film's first image, in which "an unwieldy, ponderous garbage truck rumbles through the narrow streets like some monstrous, mechanical behemoth." Our cast follows close behind the truck in a funeral procession. Larry's Boris Karloff-esque star Stephen Cavanaugh has recently lost his wife to cancer caused by the appalling pollution that fills the air, water, and land of the city.[233] The circumstances of Cavanaugh's wife's death, reiterated constantly throughout the film, seem designed to invoke the memory of Rachel Carson, who died from pollution-related cancer in 1964, shortly after her landmark *Silent Spring* helped catalyze the modern environmental movement.

Prompted by the death of his star's wife, Larry suffers a profound crisis of conscience about the cultural status and social relevance of the films his studio produces. Larry's growing insecurities seem to be given shape in the mocking form of Avant Garde British film writer/director Peter Hastings, Lee's portrait of banal highbrow culture – and of the director, rather than the producer, as auteur. Hastings' films are popular with "intense young people" and earn him the admiration of the academic elite, a fact

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[232] The Monster Makers

[233] The Monster Maker

rubbed in Larry's face during a sequence in which Larry visits a university campus to see his wife. The faculty, Larry's wife included, is seen fawning over the grandiloquent Hastings at a cocktail party. Larry, meanwhile, can only draw the attention of Catherine's father, a vulgarly capitalist banker who congratulates the filmmaker on his complete lack of artistic pretensions. It is unlikely that the irony of Lee including a satirical portrait of an Avant Garde European auteur in a script intended for direction by Alain Resnais escaped either man.[234]

Larry's professional and artistic crisis is deepened as Cavanaugh threatens not to complete the picture he is currently filming unless Larry next produces a serious film drawing attention to the pollution crisis. The actor demands "You must promise to forgo your empty horror films and join the fight against the evil that killed my wife." Larry balks, but his ex-wife Catherine's enthusiasm for the project convinces him. Larry becomes lost in research on the project and finds that his usual sources of financing, including Catherine's father, are not eager to back his venture into the Avant Garde. But hope emerges in the form of scripter Pat, who rushes to Larry's side and announces that she knows how to complete his anti-pollution epic.[235]

In the script's unusual third act, Larry and Pat search for Cavanaugh at his decaying mansion and the viewer slowly realizes that the story's stars have entered the sort of film Larry – and Lee - were always destined to produce. "Something weird and menacing is beginning to occur," and the picture shifts from workplace dramedy to schlock horror. Most of *Monster Makers* is unambiguously realistic, with action and dialogue as subdued as Lee ever wrote. In the third act, Lee's familiar, florid tone begins to take over. Gazing out the door of Cavanaugh's house, Pat notices, "that the scene outside resembles an old horror film setting, what with the desolate, barren, gloomy atmosphere just outside the window." as

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[234] The Monster Makers

[235] The Monster Makers

our heroes find themselves threatened by masses of garbage growing at an exponential rate and seemingly guided by a supernatural intelligence. It is revealed that Cavanaugh "with a piercing, maniacal expression in his eyes," is commanding waves of pollution to choke the city.[236] In a development predicting post-modern metacommentaries like Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002), our protagonist has become immersed in the film he is determined to create. Compared to the uncertainty regarding time, place, and even reality which Resnais wove into his films, the moment is tame. We might think of *Last Year at Marienbad*'s two lovers – or maybe they aren't – standing beside a statue in a park as the audience is left to wonder whether they are seeing a reality from the past, the present, or merely a depiction of the story the man is telling, which may itself be true or false. For Lee, however, *Monster Maker*'s third act is a surprisingly experimental moment, though its purpose is familiar. By drawing attention to the film as a created thing, Lee draws the audience's attention to the picture's creators. This highlighting of the unreality of a piece of media is a technique Lee used in the earliest days of the Marvel Revolution.

Suddenly the film returns to Pat and Larry in Cavanaugh's living room, revealing that all of the preceding chaos had been part of Pat's proposal for the pollution feature.

PAT: Yes, it would have been the only way for you to do it.

LARRY: The way I know best—as a horror story.

Just as quickly, however, we are plunged back into the horror film as Pat and Larry discover Cavanaugh's corpse, soaking wet and covered in garbage, clutching his wife's portrait. The two filmmakers bolt, but as they drive away the garbage-filled winds that crippled Larry's car begin to circle it once more. With that, the film abruptly ends.[237]

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[236] The Monster Makers

[237] The Monster Makers

The film offers us little resolution regarding the cast's story. The tormented Cavanaugh dies, still convinced Larry will not make his film and that his message won't be heard. Even our protagonist, Larry, is offered little resolution. The producer flees over the horizon, possibly in a film or possibly in reality, with no funding or firm plans for his next picture. In truth, Larry's story needs no resolution, because *The Monster Makers* isn't his story, it's Lee's. After spending three of the film's four act structure outlining the temptations and false promises offered by high culture, in the movie's final chapter Lee reverts to the type of genre fare with which he is most familiar.

Larry's temptation to abandon the wholesome popular for the hollow pretense of the highbrow is mirrored in the film's romantic B-Plot, which sees Larry torn between his professorial ex-wife Catherine and his faithful screenwriter Pat. Catherine is an Assistant Professor of Contemporary Literature at Oyster Bay College and serves as the embodiment of the impractical highbrow, the manifestation of art for art's sake. Catherine is introduced at an "intellectual, arty" University gathering and condemns Larry's films as "shallow… juvenile, unintellectual pablum." Briefly reconnecting with Larry as he plans his serious, highbrow feature, she declares that his proposed anti-pollution film as a sign he is "turning his back on commercialism." Ultimately, Catherine's sense of social responsibility is shown to be hollow, little more than a whim; she and Hastings abandon Larry and his anti-pollution crusade to fly off to Europe.[238]

If Catherine is a caricatured representative of one end of the supposed art/commerce spectrum, her father is the other. Mr. Reynolds dismisses his daughter as "all for art, and culture—with capital letters…" and proclaims his kinship with the more "practical, down-to-earth" Morgan. Reynolds celebrates Larry as an efficient factory foreman, churning out profitable product with no concern for

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[238] The Monster Makers

artistry or other intellectual pursuits: "Larry turns them out like confetti, so there must be a market for them."

Larry must eschew both Catherine and her father and the inextricably linked but false concepts of art which they represent and embrace Pat. Pat, Larry's longtime screenwriter, realizes the value of Larry's work and its ability to serve as an expression of his inner life long before he does. Only after rejecting the false dichotomy of art vs. commerce and embracing the significance and legitimacy of his popular but disrespected films does Larry realize he and Pat are in love. In fact, the shift into the exploitation film with a message takes place at the exact moment that Larry and Pat first sleep together – the consummation of his relationship with Pat and with popular culture are simultaneous, parallel acts of conception.

It is the fundamental irony of the screenplay that Lee's defense of popular art and the creators who produce it was meant to be his ticket out of the comic industry and into more highbrow pursuits. At first, it seemed such hopes might be realized, but it eventually became clear the project would never reach the screen. As Lee tells it, it was Resnais who insisted he fill the script with "big scenes," working on the idea that such sequences would be cheap if shot in France.[239] The pair had signed with Martin Ransohoff, producer of films such as *The Sandpiper* (1965) and *Ice Station Zebra* (1968), but when they presented him with the completed screenplay, he became convinced it would dramatically exceed its $1 million dollar budget.[240] Lee, with almost desperate eagerness, was more than happy to alter the script, but Resnais was determined that not a single word of Lee's vision be altered. As a consequence of the director's intransigence, the script was consigned to molder on a shelf. In this tale, oft retold by Lee, he was more than happy to revert to his old, collaborative ways – it was the French Auteurist, understanding

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[239] Brian Cronin, Comic Book Legends Revealed #300, 11 Feb. 2011, *Comic Book Resources*, http://www.cbr.com/comic-book-legends-revealed-300-part-1/

[240] Weiler

the screenplay as a fully-formed expression of Lee's authorial genius, who would not bend. For his part, Resnais simply lamented that sufficient funding was unavailable: "The budget was too high, that's always the problem."[241] By 1974, both *The Inmates* and *The Monster Makers* were, for all intents and purposes, dead, although as late as 1976 Lee was hoping to revive the project, telling producer Steve Krantz that Resnais intended to return to the film, which Lee felt was "the perfect type of plot for today's market."[242]

<u>Politics and Realism</u>

The motivations behind the change wrought by Lee and his colleagues on the comic industry lacked the prominent political element found in the New Waves in film and science-fiction. Ramzi Fawaz, in his *The New Mutants*, adroitly argues that in the letter pages of the early *Fantastic Four* comics Lee and Kirby fostered the development of a new, potentially radically progressive community; "From the outset Lee and Kirby self-consciously framed *The Fantastic Four* letters column as a forum for discussing the transformations taking place in Marvel Comics, and U.S. culture more broadly, in the 1960s. It soon became a social laboratory for the production of a new counterpublic, the Marvel Comics readership." This counterpublic space was "one that was often (though not always) organized by distinctly left-of-center political ideals."[243] Lee was no radical, however, and Fawaz goes on to accurately note that Lee and Kirby were "staunch liberals." While his adherence to the consensus liberalism of the post-war era was often evident, Lee consistently struggled to remain apolitical, a key difference between the Marvel Revolution and contemporary artistic movements in other media. Lee's own political position

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[241] Blume a10

[242] Stan Lee to Steve Krantz, 7/2/76, Stan Lee collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[243] Ramzi Fawaz, <u>The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics</u>, (New York: NYU, 2016) pg 95

in no way invalidates or reduces in importance the ways in which fans have read the stories he co-created and the ways in which these stories have been used by marginalized social groups, aspects of the Marvel Revolution which Fawaz eloquently explicates.

Lee actively refused to corroborate political readings of the works he co-created and protested that any such readings were strictly the product of the reader. In *Fantastic Four #54*, a letter appears from a reader who understands the Galactus saga as coded support for the Vietnam War: "The moral: a freedom-loving people, no matter where in the galaxy they exist, will not hesitate to help their fellows. We Americans, as the Silver Surfer, should be glad to help our neighbors in Viet Nam." In response, Lee wrote:

> Hooo boy! We never know what kind of message Marvelites are gonna read into our swingin' little sagas! We think your allegorical references are clever as all get-out, Greg, and we're glad you enjoyed the apparent symbolism. *But* – two'll getcha ten that our next mail contains a whole caboodle of letters from equally imaginative fans who are utterly convinced that Galactus represented Robert McNamara, while the Silver Surfer was Wayne Morse – with Alicia symbolizing Lady Bird! That's one of the most interesting things about creating these little imageries for such aware fans – we can't dot an *I* without someone reading some deep subliminal message into it.[244]

Lee himself was never particularly political: artist Herb Trimpe explains that Lee "was fun to hang out with, but never talked serious opinions about this or that – not politics or religion or what was going on in the news or any of that stuff."[245] This tendency, coupled with a desire not to offend that was motivated both by a longing for profits and wide recognition and a general aversion to conflict, meant that

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[244] Stan Lee, "Whosoever Finds the Evil Eye…," *Fantastic Four #54,* Marvel Comics, 1966

[245] Fingeroth and Thomas, pg 106

the paratext of the early Marvel comics, a space entirely under Lee's control, displayed a notable equivocalness about politics.

Lee's reluctance to choose a political stance echoed through the letters page and Bullpen Bulletins of Marvel's comics. In one 1966 issue, he happily announced that Berkeley's SLATE political party, one of the founding elements of the New Left, had used Marvel characters on campaign posters: "Have you heard about our cavortin' characters entering politics?... Obviously, they're one bunch of campus cut-ups that are really facin' front!"[246] Four issues later, however, Lee gave an even more enthusiastic write-up to a very different student organization: "In the June '66 ish of THE NEW GUARD, published by The Young Americans for Freedom, there was an adroit appraisal of the Marvel Mystique which really set us back on our heels! (Aside to dynamic Dave Nolan – your no-prize is on the way!)"[247] Whether or not he ever received his no-prize, Nolan would go on to play a significant role in right-wing politics, co-founding America's Libertarian Party. His enthusiasm for Marvel and its fans, which he called "a new potentially right-wing organization of formidable power" that could be "bigger than the Birch Society, YAF and the Americans for Constitutional Action all rolled into one,"[248] was predicated largely on the pronounced anti-communism in Marvel's comics of the early '60s.

In this, Nolan was participating in a lively debate which had broken out in the letter pages of *Fantastic Four* regarding the use of caricatured Communists like the Red Ghost as villains. One of the first letters on the topic came from comic fan (and future creator of Howard the Duck) Steve Gerber, who wrote in to declare sadly that, learning the name of the next issue's villain, "Never in my wildest flights of

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[246] Stan Lee, "Whosoever Finds the Evil Eye…!" *Fantastic Four* #54, Marvel Comics 1966

[247] The "no-prize" was the comical commendation Lee developed to recognize fans who caught continuity errors, wrote particularly strong letters, or otherwise merited awards for which the publisher wasn't prepared to pay. Eventually, recipients actually received a decorated (empty) envelope.

[248] David Nolan, "Bigger Than Batman," *The New Guard*, June 1966

fancy did I dream 'red' would refer to the communists!!"[249] The debate intensified a few months later,

when a fan wrote in to opine, "Are you trying encourage [sic] World War III? I read countless other

comics and in none have I read such anti-Communist stuff… I believe in the American way of life and do

not believe in Communism, however, why can't we have our beliefs and let them have theirs, and still

exist in friendship?" Lee's initial instinct was to appeal to authority, writing, "We spend billions for

national defense, Jim. Who do you think we're concerned about – the Eskimos??" [250] before inviting

other fans to write in with their opinions. When one fan, a self-professed member of "a left-wing

organization" in England, objected to the "slanderous allegations against the Communists," Lee

responded with one of his very rare serious comments, bereft of his usual slang and silliness: "if you want

to be a member of a left-wing organization in England, that's your business. We won't take the time to

answer your remarks now, as we're sure that many of our loyal, democratic fans can, and will, answer

you far more sagely than we."[251]

By 1966, as Lee's popularity on campuses grew and he spent more and more of his time speaking

at universities, the Communism debate disappeared from Marvel's pages and Lee began curtailing even

the already equivocal political opinions he had earlier expressed. In 1978, Lee would attempt to explain

away his earlier attitude:

> It was really a more naïve time, in those years, and I'm a product of the times… [and] had been
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> conditioned. During WWII, we were told that we were the good guys, and the Nazis were the
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> bad guys… and I still believe it… A few years later, when the word came down from D.C. that
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> the Commies are the bad guys, I just acted like one of Pavlov's dogs. Then came Viet Nam, then

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[249] Stan Lee, "Prisoners of the Pharoah!" *Fantastic Four* No. 19, Marvel Comics 1963

[250] Stan Lee, "The Hulk Vs. the Thing," Fantastic Four No. 25, Marvel Comics 1964

[251] Stan Lee, "Behold! A Distant Star!" Fantastic Four No. 37, Marvel Comics 1965

came student protestors, then came a whole change in the country. I think you'll find at that point we got off the kick.[252]

While Lee was uncomfortable with potentially controversial political stances, as his collaborations with Resnais demonstrated he loved nothing more than to engage in bombastic moralizing that spoke in sweeping tones and avoided targeting individuals, organizations, or social structures by speaking of a vaguely defined "humanity." At their core, Lee's statements tended to reflect his continued comfort with the post-war liberal consensus and his use of that position to appeal to the broadest audience segment possible.

This impulse towards vague moralizing manifested in sequences like the one that concluded a 1963 issue of *Fantastic Four*. The issue saw Hitler, disguised as the villainous Hate-Monger, unmasked and killed. In the closing panels, Mr. Fantastic declares: "Until men truly love each other, regardless of race, creed, or color, the Hate-Monger will still be undefeated! Let's never forget that!" Lee, in his role as omniscient narrator, agrees: "And Reed Richards' words never shall be forgotten! Not while the stars and stripes still wave! Not while America endures!"[253] Lee tended to strip issues of their political dimensions and present them as simple moral or personal issues. Asked in 1998 about his introduction of African-American characters into his comics during the 60's, Lee demurred "I wasn't thinking of civil rights…. I had a lot of friends who were black and we had artists who were black. So it occurred to me… why aren't there any black heroes? Just like today I think there ought to be more Hispanic heroes, there ought to be some Scandinavian heroes, and Native American heroes. I think we ought to play up all the possibilities."[254]

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[252] Fawaz 112

[253] "The Hate-Monger!"

[254] American Comic Book Chronicles: 1960-1964 89

In Lee's understanding, the key element that led to the success of the post-1961 Marvel comics was the injection of a particular type of realism. This was a character-based realism that saw superheroes behaving in recognizably human ways and coping with problems that would be familiar to readers. As Lee explained, "just because you have a superpower that doesn't mean you might not have dandruff, or trouble with girls, or have trouble paying your bills."[255] The overarching stories, of course, remained packed to the brim with the weird and wonderful – aliens, super villains, other dimensions – but the characters approached these phenomena with recognizable emotions. As Lee explained in a 1968 interview, "we tried to inject all kinds of realism, as we call it, into the stories, and I say, 'as we call it' because, obviously, the stories are fairy tales, anyway. We think of them as fairy tales for grown ups."[256]

Lee is often credited as being more explicitly political then he actually was because of later creators that built off the changes he had helped bring to the comic industry. By 1970, as Lee's day-to-day involvement with the comics declined, the injection of "realism" into superhero comics had begun to evolve into a more explicitly political engagement with contemporary social issues at both Marvel and DC. By the early '70s, a new generation of writers and artists, many of them products of a heady mix of '60s politics and Marvel fandom, would use Lee's "realism" to address contemporary social issues in an even more openly political, and often explicitly radical, manner. Marvel comic creators such as Jim Starlin, Steve Englehart, and Steve Gerber would produce stories, like one that saw Captain America turning his back on the flag out of disgust with the Nixon Administration after driving the president to suicide, which Lee would never have dreamed of creating.

Even as Marvel became more willing to engage in political causes, the increasingly distanced Lee remained focused on realism primarily as it related to character. He would gradually expand this

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[255] Neal Conan interview

[256] Neal Conan interview

approach to encompass vaguely humanist, non-partisan injections of social realism, but character remained at the center of his creative approach. Carla Joseph, Stan Lee's secretary, made this policy explicit in a 1972 letter to Bradford A. Beebe, a student at Ohio Northern University: "As for when we started to introduce the 'socially relevant' topics into our mags—it was around ten years ago when Stan decided to start making the superheroes more human. The relevance was a natural outgrowth of treating heroes as real people." Joseph contrasts this approach with the more explicitly political one taken by DC in books like *Green Lantern*, elaborating that "unlike our competitors, we started working the social issues into the mags through centering the main action of the story around the people rather than the social problems. Thus, we write mags about our characters who find that they have to deal with the problems of today just as we do in the real world"[257]

In his efforts to translate Marvel properties to the big screen, Lee would stress this "realism" as the key to successfully adapting Marvel's properties to other mediums. In a concept outline for the late '70s *Marvel Comics Super Power Hour* cartoon,[258] Lee explains, "Perhaps the greatest appeal of the Fantastic Four lies in the fact that, despite their invincible super powers and their mind-staggering fears, they are carefully depicted as real people, each with a definite, razor-sharp personality. They react realistically to the situations that confront them, and relate to each other in a manner calculated to invoke the highest degree of empathy on the part of the youthful viewer."[259] Similarly, Lee's bible for a proposed 1979 Spider-Man series reiterates the Marvel formula: "mix the fantasy with the most recognizable, realistic, everyday type of plot complication, and lo and behold – you've got the world's

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[257] Carla Joseph to Bradford A Beebe, Ohio Northern University, 17 Oct. 1972. Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[258] The project seems to have morphed into DePatie-Freleng's Fantastic Four series

[259] "Marvel Comics Super Power Hour outline," undated, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

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most popular, best-selling superhero swinger – the Amazing Spider-Man!"[260] Lee ended a mid-80s pitch for a new animated series by proclaiming "Fantasy combine with realism! It's a formula that young people love. It's what we do the best. It's what SOLARMAN is all about!"[261]

Throughout the '80s, Lee grew increasingly frustrated with the extent to which comic adaptations concentrated on plot and special effects at the expense of character. In the late '70s, an interviewer had asked Lee "If you were in charge of the [Marvel] TV shows, what changes would you make?" Lee responded "I'd spend more time on the personalities of the lead characters and less time on the typical plot values. That's what we've done with our comic books."[262] In his comments on a Dr. Strange script, he noted, "The special effects can be taken for granted; we know they will be there and we know you're good at them – but the most important thing is to feel that we have a good, solid, understandable, character driven, personal story first and foremost."[263] Throughout his life, Lee remained devoted to the artistic ideal of character-based realism.

Using Pollution

Historian Jim Hillier has asserted that *Cahiers du Cinema*, from which many of the New Wave directors emerged, remained largely apolitical.[264] It is certainly true that the journal was founded, in part,

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[260] "So This Is – Spider-Man!," Bible, 4 Sept. 1979, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[261] Stan Lee, "Solarman," [undated], Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[262] Swires

[263] Stan Lee, "Dr. Strange notes," 17 March 1993, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[264] Jim Hillier, Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985)

to be a less ideologically driven alternative to the Communist *L'Ecran*. Nonetheless, as Richard Neupert explains, for many of the directors who emerged from *Cahiers*, the artistic mission of the New Wave was explicitly political. Its assault on the subject matter, production methods, and poetics of the French cinematic tradition was synonymous with an attack on an unfulfilling post-war political and social order in which dynamic national economic growth failed to bring about noticeable increases in social mobility.[265] These politics were also tied to the directors' new approach to authorship, which was similarly driven by a desire for the new and the authentic in the face of a faltering establishment.

Resnais and the fellow members of the Left Bank subgroup tended to be even more political than their *Cahiers*-based colleagues. Resnais, for instance, was a signatory of the Manifesto of the 121, which called for the Algerian War to be recognized as a legitimate war of independence and demanded that the French government respect conscientious objectors. It is illustrative of the differences between the two men that, faced with demands that he condemn an equally unpopular war, Lee steadfastly refused to take a position regarding the Vietnam War.

Given the political inclinations of each of the two men, it is unsurprising that the choice to focus on environmental issues seems to have initially come from Resnais.[266] The choice of topic suited Lee perfectly – environmental activism was socially relevant but also enjoyed broad-based support in the early '70s. Lee would return to the issue again and again, integrating it into any proposal he felt needed a political element. Both of the proposed Lee/Resnais collaborations took as their central theme the environment and, more specifically, the proliferation of garbage in American cities. Both *The Monster Makers* and *The Inmates* feature dramatic scenes of once-pristine natural landscapes and cityscapes overwhelmed by mountains of rapidly proliferating refuse, and a significant portion of the conclusion of

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[265] Neupert 7

[266] Monaco 166

each planned film sees the heroes battling against waves of garbage. For Lee, even given the creative decisions he would take to mitigate any possible controversy, *The Monster Makers* and *The Inmates* were the most explicitly political material he had written up to that point.

The Monster Makers and *The Inmates* drew from a fear of impending environmental crisis that was deeply relevant to both Resnais' France and Lee's America. As Resnais was working with the comic creator in the late '60s and early '70s, a young environmental movement was burgeoning in France. In the wake of World War II, the formerly war-torn nation had engaged in a bout of frenzied economic growth, electrifying the countryside, developing heavy industry, and harnessing nuclear power for military and civilian use. A collection of anti-nuclear activists, calling themselves "political ecologists," began to question the entire nature of post-war French society and, particularly, its emphasis on growth planned by a technocratic elite. Such questions were one manifestation of a discontent with what were perceived to be the broken promises of the post-war regime, the same anger at a faltering establishment that inspired the New Wave itself.[267]

In 1968, a wave of protests rocked France, as students led workers from multiple industries in a strike that would bring the nation to a standstill for a month. As Susan Pincetl explains, these protests differed from earlier nature protection movements as they, "defined environmental problem as stemming from decisions made by political and administrative apparatuses, including the Grandes Ecoles.... there was growing doubt about the ability of scientific expertise to manage the nation's resources successfully."[268] At the moment Lee and Resnais were collaborating in the early '70s, the French environmental movement was recruiting a wide range of journalists, writers, and artists to its cause as the

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[267] Stephanie Pincetl, Some Origins of French Environmentalism, Forest & Conservation History, *Forest & Conservation History* Vol. 37 Iss. 2, 1 April 1993

[268] Pincetl 86

French government attempted a belated response to the movement by founding a ministry for the environment.[269]

Lee's own exposure to the issues driving the environmental movement were, if anything, more immediate and dramatic than those experienced by Resnais. For Lee and other New Yorkers, the portentous trash truck and apathetic garbage man that opened *The Monster Makers* would have had particular resonance. Lee lived in a New York City in which images of public space clogged with rotting refuse were common as the city suffered through a garbage collection crisis. Jimmy Breslin described New York in 1969 as "block after block of hot, filthy houses and sidewalks lined with garbage cans that never seem to be collected and have been kicked over by dogs and kids."[270] Mayor John Lindsay's attempts to solve the crisis by consolidating several government agencies and creating little city halls to make government more responsive were met by resistance from sanitation workers who felt his plans unfairly benefited minorities. To express their disgust, sanitation launched a nine-day strike in 1968. Themis Chronopoulos describes the result:

> Each day of the strike, ten thousand tons of garbage remained uncollected, spilling into the streets and sidewalks. Rats began to overwhelm portions of the city, and fires on piles of trash became common. The health commissioner declared a health emergency, fearing that uncollected garbage would clog sewer drains and cause floods, which would in turn spread hepatitis, typhoid, dysentery, and other infectious diseases.[271]

The years following the strike saw ill will between the sanitation workers and city residents increase dramatically as several tense episodes in New York heightened the sense of a dysfunctional city

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[269] Pincetl

[270] Themis Chronopoulos, The Lindsay Administration and the Sanitation Crisis of New York City, 1966-1973, *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 40 Iss. 6, pg. 1139

[271] Chronopoulos, 1144

overrun by its own garbage. Beginning in 1968, New York City became the sight of several civil actions that sought to protest inadequate garbage collection by filling the city's streets with trash. In February 1968 in the Lower East Side and August 1969 in East Harlem, residents blocked thoroughfares with waste in incidents that inspired scenes in both of Lee and Resnais' planned collaborations. In June 1970, two men in Brooklyn filled a city street with a great mound of refuge and set it alight, beginning two days of looting and arson in what would become known as the Brownsville Trash Riots.[272] Smaller protests occurred throughout the city in the weeks and months that followed. Lee, like *The Monster Maker*'s Larry and Pat, seemed lost in a civilization buried under its own refuse. The garbage crisis' role as inspiration for *The Monster Makers* is made explicit within the film, which features a montage depicting garbage men, Mayor Lindsay, and footage of the Brownsville riots.

The second film Resnais and Lee developed together, *The Inmates*, was even more concerned with environmental issues then *The Monster Makers*. The moralistic intentions of Lee's treatment are made explicit by the project's subtitle, which labels the proposed film "A comi-drama fable for our time." The story features a "beautiful, aristocratic-looking" alien named Angel descending to Earth to judge whether it should be obliterated by a council of extraterrestrials who fear that the madness demonstrated by Earth society might spread to other worlds. Initially repulsed by Earthling behavior, Angel is rendered more optimistic about humanity by a head injury suffered in a car accident and falls in love with an Earth man. Angel tries to use her alien powers to help mankind, in particular cleaning up the polluted streets of New York City, but gradually returns to her senses and realizes she "can only affect physical things, but the ills that afflict mankind are far deeper, far more serious than anything she can cure." [273]

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[272] Chronopoulos

[273] Stan Lee, The Inmates, [undated], Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

The film reaches its climax at the Staten Island Landfill, where Angel is driven to despair by the sight of so much garbage. An anguished Angel tells her human lover: "Haven't you guessed? Have you never suspected? Earth is an asylum. Men are all inmates. For the human race is hopelessly insane!" But Angel comes up with a plan that will force man to abandon their divisions and pull together in the face of a shared crisis. Angel's chosen cataclysm is, "the by-product of our greed, our lust, our insatiable urge to produce more and more of everything…. It's the pollution that we ourselves have caused. It's the pollution that's spreading to every part of the globe upon which we live!"[274] In a sequence that echoes the ending of *The Monster Makers*, Angel speeds up the consequences of human pollution and, "we see scenes of pollution increasing, spreading wildly throughout the cities, the rivers, the woodlands. We see it in homes, on farms, and in the streets."[275]

Another New Wave

The Inmates, an environmentally concerned science-fiction tale, evokes a third artistic revolution taking place during the '60s and early '70s, this one effecting science fiction literature. Science-fiction has always exerted a profound influence on the similarly fantastical genre of the superhero comics. Many of the comic medium's most prominent writers and artists, including Superman creators Joe Siegel and Jerry Schuster, had emerged from science-fiction fandoms, one of the earliest modern fan movements. In fact, Marvel owner Martin Goodman had worked for sci-fi publisher Hugo Gernsbeck before entering the comic industry.[276] Julius Schwartz, who oversaw the superhero revival at DC in the late '50s and early

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[274] "The Inmates"

[275] "The Inmates"

[276] Jones

'60s, founded the first science fiction fanzine, the *Time Traveler*, in January 1932.[277] Schwartz's collaborator in that publishing endeavor was Mort Weisinger, the editor of DC's Superman books for several decades. The pair also founded Solar Sales Service, a literary agency representing some of the late '30s and early '40s most respected science-fiction authors. It was whispered around DC's offices that writers with a background churning out pulpy sci-fi were treated much better by Weisinger and Schwartz than those from other fields. Lee frequently drew inspiration from sci-fi media – the 1971 character Morbius the Living Vampire, suggested by Lee and fleshed out by Roy Thomas, was based on the science-fiction feature *Forbidden Planet* (1956). In fact, the very tone of Lee's hyperbolic prose in the Marvel paratext owed a debt to the work of sci-fi magazine editor/writers like Gernsbeck. Lee acknowledged the kinship between comics and sci-fi novels in a 1987 interview:

> Comics today, the super-hero comics, are one of the best providers of fantasy. You know, where else can you get fairy tales for grown-ups other than the comics? Occasionally, George Lucas or [Steven] Spielberg do a movie, but there's so little of that. You can buy a science-fiction novel, and those are great, but very often they're a little too heavy, and comics are probably the most enjoyable way to read a fantasy story.[278]

The environmentally-minded sci-fi stories crafted by Resnais and Lee were part a wave of new, socially conscious science fiction literature that emerged in the early '60s. This movement, eventually dubbed the New Wave, was concerned with the same intertwining issues of cultural respectability, social relevance, and romantic authorship that drove much of Lee's own writing from the mid-60s on.

In 1950, science fiction began a move from the perishable pages of the monthly magazines that Weisinger and Schwartz had so eagerly thumbed to a more permanent form when Doubleday became the

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[277] Gabilliet

[278] John Weber, "Stan Lee interview"

first major publisher to launch a line of hardcover sci-fi volumes. Other publishers followed, first reprinting older stories but increasingly publishing new work written specifically for the book format. As Rob Latham explains, with the shift in format came a change in the way sci-fi creators understood authorship.[279] As in its cheap literature precursor the dime novel, it was common practice for sci-fi magazine editors to alter the writing submitted to them in order to fit the perceived desire of the readership. As science fiction began appearing primarily in hardcover books, this more collaborative process of creation faded away: "authors could begin to imagine themselves as independent professionals with their own unique artistic visions."[280] Sci-fi authors' romantic conception of their work was furthered by the fact that a boom in science-fiction publishing in the '50s meant that, for the first time, it was possible to make a comfortable living writing science fiction.[281]

The '50s sci-fi boom also occasioned the formation, in 1956, of the Milford Writers' Conference, an annual science fiction workshop which sought to raise the cultural standing of science fiction, in the process furthering changing conceptions of sci-fi authorship. As part of their drive for sci-fi to be considered serious literature, a group of individuals associated with the Conference, known somewhat derisively as the "Milford Mafia," urged sci-fi authors to act like the creators of meaningful art. To achieve respectability, adherents to this burgeoning movement began to borrow the techniques of "respectable" literature, particularly social satire, to justify their claims for science-fiction as a legitimate art form. [282] In the '60s, the mixture of social satire, romantic authorship, and the drive for respectability intensified and became more explicitly political, manifesting in a movement that came to be known as the New Wave. The name denoted the movement's kinship to the New Wave in French cinema, which

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[279] Rob Latham, "Fiction 1950-1963," Routledge Companion to Science Fiction, eds Mark Bould and Andrew M. Butler (New York: Routledge, 2009), pg. 81

[280] "Fiction 1950-1963" 81

[281] "Fiction 1950-1963" 81

[282] "Fiction 1950-1963" 87

similarly sought to enliven an outdated medium and assert conceptions of romantic authorship. The New Wave was largely popularized by Judith Merril, a prominent editor and book reviewer whose annual anthology of the year's best sci-fi was a treasure trove of the New Wave. She was joined in promoting the movement by Michael Moorcock, who became editor of the British *New Worlds* magazine in 1964, and converted the journal into one of the primary vehicles for the New Wave. Moorcock himself was adamant that the New Wave had ensured science fiction's reputation as serious literature.[283] The New Wave also provided an opportunity for female authors to assert themselves in the male-dominated world of science-fiction. Inspired by the women's movements and other political developments in late '60s and early '70s America, female sci-fi writers addressed a number of socially relevant topics, imagining more egalitarian societies and challenging stereotypes of gender and sexuality. Writers like Marge Piercy and Ursula La Guin produced works which combined a feminist perspective with the consideration of ecological issues.[284]

Lee and Resnais' collaborations thus followed in the footsteps of earlier works such as John Christopher's 1956 *The Death of Grass* and Cyril Kornbluth's 1958 "Shark Ship." As the New Wave picked up steam, these examples of ecologically-themed science fiction were joined by stories such as John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) and *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), and Ernest Callenbah's *Ecotopia* (1975).[285] This new, environmentally conscience sci-fi also began to appear in film during the mid-70, influencing critically acclaimed pictures such as *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Silent Running* (1971) as well as less ambitious movies including *Frogs* (1972) and

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283 Rob Latham, "The New Wave," Companion to Science Fiction, pg. 201

284 Helen Merrick, "Fiction, 1964-1979," Routledge Companion to Science Fiction, eds Mark Bould and Andrew M. Butler (New York: Routledge, 2009) 109; Patrick D. Murphy, "Environmentalism," Routledge Companion to Science Fiction, eds Mark Bould and Andrew M. Butler (New York: Routledge, 2009)

285 Merrick 110

Phase IV (1973), and Squirm (1976).[286] The heroic, god-like scientists of earlier science fiction, figures that had inspired Lee co-creations like Reed Richards and Bruce Banner, disappeared. They were replaced by a keen awareness of the fragility of man's place in the ecosystem and the folly and hubris of ignoring the demands of the environment.

Members of this New Wave were no strangers to comics, understanding the close kinship the medium held with the pulps that had launched the science-fiction genre. Michael Moorcock's character Elric appeared in several 1972 issues of Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian*, co-authored by Moorcock and Roy Thomas. Harlan Ellison had written a 1971 story featured in *The Incredible Hulk*,[287] had contributed material to Marvel's Mad-rip-off *Crazy*, and in 1980 was working with Lee on a planned Black Widow television series.[288] Ellison saw the parallels between the tentative steps Lee was making towards social relevance and the dramatic changes the New Wave was bringing to science fiction but was frustrated by Lee's inherent conservatism, incessantly urging him to go further, to use his comics as a more radical engine of change. In 1980, he sent Lee a letter from a young man named Steven Grant who had studied television at college but, having read Ellison's introduction to the collection *Strange Wine* (1978) as well as Jerry Mander's "Four Arguments For the Elimination of Television," had sworn off the medium. Ellison explained:

> STAN: I swear, honest to God, I'll never nuhdz [sic] you with another of these. This is the last
> one. Every time one of these comes in – and they come in on an average of three or four a week
> – and have done so since July of 1978 – I get the overwhelming, slavering need to send it on to
> you. To prove one small, strident voice in the madhouse can effect change. But I resist the silly

[286] Peter Wright, "Film and Television, 1960-1980," Routledge Companion to Science Fiction, eds Mark Bould and Andrew M. Butler (New York: Routledge, 2009)

[287] Harlan Ellison and Roy Thomas, "The Brute… That Shouted Love… At the Heart of the Atom," Incredible Hulk 140, Marvel Comics 1971

[288] Stan Lee to Harlan Ellison, 4/14/1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

impulse each time. But this one is a doozy, kiddo. I just had to send you a Xerox copy. Forgive, sahib! I won't do it again; I promise. I am not being mean-spirited, merely demonstrating with restraint, by the paradigm of my life, that if a pipsqueak like me can move the counter a micromillimeter off center, then a guy with your clout can shake it even more.[289]

As suggested by Ellison's letter, Lee's approach to social issues like environmentalism lacked the radicalism that defined some works of New Wave sci-fi. In fact, the pollution issue was ideal for Lee since, in the early '70s, it was relatively non-controversial and allowed the comic creator to engage in his beloved moralizing without having to commit to a position that might alienate a significant portion of his audience. Concern with the environment was certainly current; incidents like the New York garbage crisis meant that environmental problems were readily visible to many Americans, creating a broad coalition eager to combat the problem. Stories concerning the environment were commonplace in 1970, making the cover of *Time*, *Fortune*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Look*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.[290] Robert Heilbroner wrote in *The New York Review of Books* that "Ecology has become the Thing," elaborating, "The ecology issue has assumed the dimensions of a vast popular fad."[291] This was made dramatically clear by the positive and widespread reaction to the first Earth Day, held as Lee developed his projects with Resnais. Though President Nixon initially opposed the event, founded by Wisconsin senator Nelson Gaylord, the public reaction to the idea was positive enough that the Republican-controlled government eventually produced Earth Day material and numerous cabinet officers voiced their support. Even Nixon was convinced to add his voice to the cresting wave of environmental concern, declaring in his February 1970 State of the Union speech that the '70s "absolutely must be the years when America pays its debt to the past by reclaiming the purity of its air, its waters… it is literally

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[289] Harlan Ellison to Stan Lee, 4/12/1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[290] Kirkpatrick Sale, The Green Revolution, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) pg. 23

[291] Robert Heilbroner, "Ecological Armageddon (Review)" *New York Review of Books*, 23 April 1970, pg. 4

now or never."[292] The April 22 event saw what environmentalist Kirkpatrick Sale called "probably the largest of all the demonstrations of the 1960s [sic]."[293] The event excited some criticism, but more of it came from the left, which saw Earth Day as an establishment-created distraction from the real issues of the day, then from the right.[294] *Time* highlighted the bi-partisan nature of ecological concerns, calling the environment, "the gut issue that can unify a polarized nation in the 1970s."[295]

Lee was careful to distance his proposed films from more radical reactions to the environmental crisis. In an extremely lengthy montage in the middle of *The Monster Makers* which mixes scenes of Larry's film research with news clips, Lee stressed bipartisan concern about the environment, featuring comments by Democrats including New Jersey Senator Harrison Williams and New York Representative Mario Biaggi, balanced by a speech by Richard Nixon.[296] Lee also went out of his way to avoid assigning blame to any particular individual or, particularly, to issuing a condemnation of capitalism as the problem's root cause. Instead, Lee pointed the finger at a generalized "humanity," as the closing, landfill-set scene in The Inmates makes clear:

> Al tells [Angel] that it can almost remind a man of what Hell itself must be like. Angel replies that it is Hell! She tells him that men have never had cause to fear purgatory after death, for we make our own Hell every moment that we live. Satan isn't our enemy—he never has been. No mere Devil could cause us the torment that we have created for ourselves.[297]

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[292] Benjamin Kline, <u>First Along the River</u>, (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011) pg 90

[293] Sale 24

[294] Sale 25

[295] Lily Rothman, "When the Environment was a Non-Partisan Issue," *Time*, 2 Dec. 2015

[296] Lee had an uncanny touch for picking politicians – all the men would eventually resign from their position in scandal-ridden disgrace.

[297] "The Inmates"

Despite the hyperbole, Lee refused to specify a target. The montage in *The Monster Makers* took a similar tact, showing trashmen, industrialists, factory foremen, and scientists expressing genuine concern for the environment; none of the men and women depicted appeared uncaring or unaware of the urgency of the issue, and the script refuses to depict anyone in an accusatory light. The problem of pollution in Lee's treatments was so general, so diffuse, that it is unlikely to give offense.

In *The Monster Makers*, Lee took this sanitizing approach a step further. The writer carefully mitigated the impact of the screenplay's most dire condemnations of society by putting them in the mouth of Thomas Cavanaugh, a bombastic ham actor in the midst of a nervous breakdown who, over the course of the film, attempts both suicide and arson. Once again, Lee hedged when faced with the opportunity to declare a political stance.

Fascinating Failures

Lee and Resnais offered *The Inmates* to producers but were told that, were they to make the film for the proposed one million, it could only be marketed as an "intellectual" film. To produce the film lavishly enough to appeal to a general audience would cost three million dollars – and they'd have to go to Japan for the special effects.[298] An art house film written by Stan Lee was not the sort of thing to set a producer's heart aflutter in the early '70s.

Lee's hopes of collaborating with Resnais did not die with *The Monster Makers* and *The Inmates*. For years, Lee searched for a project the two could produce together. In the early '70s, Lee and Lloyd

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[298] Patton and Shurts

Kaufman attempted to interest Resnais in a project known as *The Man Who Spoke to God*.[299] One unlikely project emerged from a meeting with executives at CBS regarding the 1977 Spider-Man television program. As Lee related to agent Robert Lantz, who was working with Marvel on the project: "I proposed Alain Resnais as the director.... They were ecstatic at the prospect. Now, all I have to do is convince Alain. He might go for it. Had dinner with him last night and he'd love an excuse to return to N.Y."[300] Lee's dreams of a Resnais-helmed *Spider-Man* would continue for several years. In 1980, in a letter signed "Mes Cher Amis," Lee explained to the French auteur that he was wooing Henry Winkler for the part of Peter Parker in a big-budget film and had suggested to TV's Fonzie that Resnais might direct – "he thought it might be a great idea."[301] Lee and Resnais would remain close for years, two men from very different backgrounds united by their desire to create films and their frustration with an American motion picture industry determined to keep them at arm's length. In a 2007 interview, author Frederic Tulen notes that Resnais, "lights up when I ask him if he has been in contact with Stan Lee… 'Not for some while,' he says, but they are and shall always remain friends. He recalls working on a film script with Lee in New York… "It was wonderful being in New York in those days and to see Stan Lee every morning, to talk with him and to see him smile."[302]

Lee's work with Resnais had given him the chance to refine his approach to social relevance, which was closely linked to his desire to elevate the cultural standing of the comic book and garner personal recognition as an author. For several decades, ecological issues remained Lee's favorite social issue to inject into his proposals for film and television projects. In 1986 Lee created Solarman, a Marvel universe character intended as the star of his own animated series. In one of the episodes proposed by

[299] Raphael and Spurgeon

[300] Stan Lee to Robert Lantz, 10/19 Oct. 1976, Stan Lee collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[301] Stan Lee to Alain Resnais, 4/9/1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[302] Fingeroth and Thomas, pg 90

Lee, a dethroned Dr. Doom attempts to reclaim his dictatorial powers by exchanging a cure for the depletion of the O-Zone for his usurped throne.[303] A pilot for the program was created but remained unaired for years, eventually appearing as a one-off special on Fox Kids. Similarly, Lee's mid-80s proposal for a Sub-Mariner series promised, "the highly relevant theme of man's pollution of his planet, coupled with the Rambo-like angle of one man alone courageously tackling impossible odds should certainly provide THE SUB-MARINER with an audience eager to meet him more than half-way."[304] A proposal for a film reviving the Buck Rogers character would also serve as a condemnation of pollution: "The ecological problems which everyone has been talking about so much recently will also be dealt with… A lot will be made of the fact that 20th century man messed up the earth ecologically and that it took until the 25th century for the earth to get out of the mess we put it in. Thus our film has another message."[305]

Lee's heavy reliance on social- and character-based realism to lend gravitas to comic-related cross-media proposals was heavily influenced by a mid-60s moment of Pop art-driven mainstream interest in comic books. That moment, which immediately preceded Lee's work with Resnais, granted Marvel its first, brief period of cross-media success as the publisher brought several of its new superheroes to television. Ultimately, however, the superhero fad of the mid-60s merely reinforced perceptions that comic books were frivolous kid stuff, a perception Lee and the comic industry would spend decades trying to dispel.

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[303] Stan Lee, Solarman #2, [undated], Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[304] Stan Lee, Namor, The Sub-Mariner, [undated], Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[305] Stan Lee, Buck Rogers in the 25th Century, [undated], Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Chapter 3

The Pop Art Moment

Marvel's first moment of cross-media success came in the mid-60s, as a popular fascination with "pop" turned attention towards the comic industry. As art critic Hilton Kramer explained, "Wherever one turns on the cultural, subcultural and pseudo-cultural scene at the moment, something answering to the name "pop" is visible, if not actually dominant. Just now the principal pop focus is on the comic strip,[306] which, in more forms than one can keep track of, is turning into the biggest bonanza of all."[307]

The pop moment was remarkable in its expansiveness, influencing highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture with equal aggressiveness and, seemingly, blurring the boundaries between those categories. Pop art, a movement that saw artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein fill galleries with art taken right from the pages of comic books, was one of the first Avant Garde art movements that appealed as much to the middle class as it did to intellectuals. The biggest show on television was *Batman*, a program carefully designed to appeal to the high-brow and the low-brow alike. The media was full of stories about adults reading comic books, as shocked reporters discovered grown men buying old issues of *Superman* or college students flocking to a speech by Stan Lee. This pop-saturated zeitgeist even effected children's cartoons, where Marvel's pantheon found its way to television for the first time. Despite the flurry of success the mid-60s brought to the comic industry's cross-media efforts, however,

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[306] Kramer is actually referring to comic books here and, particularly, to Superman comics. He failed to make a distinction between the two types of illustrated storytelling.

[307] Hilton Kramer, "Look! All Over! It's Esthetic… It's Business… It's Supersuccess!" *New York Times*, 29 March 1966

the pop moment passed quickly and ultimately served to reinforce popular understandings of comic books as a degraded media marred by its industrial creative system: only children could be legitimately entertained by comics, and such violent, empty fare was hardly healthy for them.

Embedded deep within the Pop Art movement and the *Batman* TV program were the same, dehumanizing assumptions about comic books and their creators which had been prevalent since the 1940s. Lichtenstein painted images based on the work of Jack Kirby and other comic artists but went to great pains to emphasize that those creators had no claim to artistic agency and were, in fact, little better than machines. To launch a comic book based series that would enjoy a significant adult audience, *Batman*'s producers resolved to bathe the material in camp, altering the hero in a way that appealed to adults by offering them a viewing position which did not threaten their cultural standing. Marvel took advantage of the pop moment to launch the trans-media adaptations *The Marvel Super Heroes* (1966)*, Spider-Man* (1967-1970), and *The Fantastic Four* (1967-1970). These animated series and the larger wave of superhero cartoons of which they were part soon excited a public backlash that echoed the Fredric Wertham-led anti-comic movement of the previous decade. Despite a momentary interest in comic books, popular attitudes towards the medium seemed to have changed little.

As television producers altered comic book material with the assumption that it was suited only for children, changes in the comic book audience were occasioning a very different set of developments within the comic industry. The comic audience was getting older, and comic books were adapting to appeal to their aging readership. The mid 1960s saw the development of a split in industrial understandings of the comic audience. Children still brought a great percentage of the comics sold, and outside media producers would remain firmly focused on these youngest readers for years. At the same time, comic creators increasingly catered to an older audience, publishing more and more mature stories. In the late '70s and '80s this split would widen dramatically, as the primary site of comic book retail shifted from newsstands and corner stores to specialized direct market outlets. Comic books and their adaptations in other media were increasingly aimed at very different audiences, complicating efforts to

bring superheroes to other media. Marvel's brief moment of cross-media success in the mid-60s ultimately proved to be a profoundly mixed blessing.

The False Promise of Pop

As cartoon panels began to grace the walls of respectable art galleries and the loftiest of highbrow critics took note, if only in passing, of the comic industry, Lee giddily embraced the Pop Art movement and its seeming promise of legitimization. For several months Lee attempted to shed any association with comic books' checkered past by labelling Marvel's output "Pop Art Productions." In his most boastful moments, Lee even claimed responsibility for the Pop Art movement, explaining to a young Roger Ebert in 1966, "I think we were the ones responsible for the pop art bit."[308] Despite Lee's enthusiasm, the Pop Art movement's views of comic books illustrates that even at a moment when cultural barriers seemed to be collapsing and comics seemed poised for a critical re-evaluation, attitudes towards the comic industry and the creators within it remained largely unchanged. At its worst, the high-profile highbrow comic art adaptations of the '60s reasserted the belief that comics were little better than trash, their creators inhuman machines, their content safe to be enjoyed only with ironic distance and the intercession of a culturally-approved gatekeeper.

The Pop Artists of the '60s were not the first members of the Avant Garde to turn their gaze upon the comic image. Picasso loved the Katzenjammer Kids, and his masterwork *Guernica* reflected the influence of anti-Fascist cartooning in the popular French press. In an untitled 1947 work, Kurt Schwitters reassembled bits of comics acquired from American servicemen into an image of a woman

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[308] Ebert

surrounded by men from various periods. Jasper Johns based a piece on popular newspaper strip *Alley Oop*. Some artists even managed to move freely between comic and Avant Garde art, a feat that would elude the comic book creators of the '60s and '70s. It must be noted, of course, that this Avant Garde interest in comics prior to the '60s was directed at the comic strip, that emanation of the pure American spirit. Attitudes towards comic books would be very different.[309]

The first stirrings of the Pop Art movement occurred in London's Institute of Contemporary Arts during the early years of the 1950s. A group of artists, architects, and critics known as the International Group (IG), dissatisfied with the bleak, austerity-wracked world of postwar Britain, were enraptured by the media pouring out of the United States. American advertisements, commercial art, magazines, and comics depicted a world of euphoric plenty, slathered in bright colors and simplistic emotions. One of the key moments in the I.G.'s development of Pop Art was 1956's "This is Tomorrow" exhibition which featured Richard Hamilton's *just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* This work, an example of the I.G.'s "pinboard aesthetic," creates a collage-like image by combining images taken from ads, magazines, and other consumer publications. In the center of the image, drawing our eye from the burlesque dancers and Hormel ham, is the cover of a *Young Romance* comic book.[310]

The American proponents of Pop lacked the sense of longing that had defined much of the work of the I.G. – after all, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and their colleagues were in the center of the consumerist fairground of Pop, not gazing at it from afar. Still, Americans were quick to draw from the same pool of candy-colored source material, and from its earliest days the American Pop Art movement made use of images borrowed from comic strips and comic books. It was Andy Warhol's 1961 image of Superman, based on a panel from *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* #24 and displayed in the window of

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[309] Gopnik 180

[310] Francis

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the Bonwit Taylor department store, that brought about his first encounter with an art dealer. Ultimately, it was New York artist Roy Lichtenstein who would become inextricably linked to the avant-garde use of comic art. Lichtenstein began drawing comic characters such as Mickey Mouse and Popeye in 1960 and quickly moved on to recreating images from the comic books of Marvel and its competitors, enlarging and subtly altering work from comic artists like Jack Kirby and Irv Novick.[311]

Lichtenstein was doing more than simply borrowing from the images produced by men like Novick and Kirby, however; he was actively working to erase all traces of individual authorship that might be present in the original panel. Lichtenstein's use of comic book artwork was based on the assumption that such material reflected the superficial, interchangeable, mechanically-produced nature of modern consumerism. The distinction between handmade and ready-made was central to much Pop art, and Lichtenstein was eager to establish his hands as the only ones involved in the creation of his art. The Pop artist went out of his way to emphasize that comics were produced by machines and not individual artists. Perhaps the most familiar element of his work were the prominent colored dots that filled every shape on his canvas. These marks, known in the printing trade as ben-day dots, are widely understood by Lichtenstein's critics as invoking the mechanical nature of the reproduction of printed images. In fact, these dots were barely noticeable on the printed comic page of the era, and the emphasis Lichtenstein placed on them served largely to position the image as the product of the mechanized printing process rather than of the earlier act of artistic creation. Differences between stories drawn by different artists, let alone between panels in the same story, were as meaningless as the differences between the cans of soup coming off an assembly line. In fact, Lichtenstein went out of his way to remove any variations that

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[311] Steven Henry Madoff, <u>Pop Art: A Critical History</u> (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)

might hint at narrative specificity or individual artistic style, eliminating or relocating minor details to better match his understanding of the "idealized, generic comic image."[312]

Lichtenstein stressed the multiple steps he took in reproducing comic images, resting his claims of authorship on this process of "Lichtensteinization" and the superior sense of composition and mastery of the techniques of fine art that guided it. Lichtenstein was quick to deprive comic creators of such legitimizing knowledge: "the comics really haven't anything I would call art connected with it [sic]. They are really using a craft ability almost entirely and artistic sense only slightly. There's composition connected with comic strips, but in a very superficial way."[313] Legitimate, proprietary authorship, it seems, remained unique to high culture.[314]

Critics were quick to accuse Lichtenstein's work of superficiality, accusations that became increasingly shrill as he began to draw more and more on comic imagery in his work. More recent critics have been more positive. In *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, a volume released to coincide with a 1990 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Adam Gopnik depicts Lichtenstein as elevating a broken medium, restoring the democratic promise that had made comic strips worthy of attention. Gopnik writes, "the effects that make Lichtenstein into Lichtenstein involved… the careful, artificial construction of what appears to be a generic, whole, "true-folk" cultural style from a real world of comics that was by then far more "fallen" and fragmented."[315]

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[312] Adam Gopnik and Kirk Varnedoe, High & Low: Modern Art Popular Culture, (New York: Harry N Abrams Inc, pg 183)

[313] Michael Lobel, Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) pg 47

[314] Lichtenstein had a personal connection to at least one of the comic artists upon whom he based his work; in 1947, future DC war-comic artist Irv Novick had been one of the officers at the boot camp where Lichtenstein served. Novick, recognizing Lichtenstein's potential, had the younger man transferred to his unit to help create posters and signs. If Lichtenstein was aware that he was borrowing directly from the works of his former superior, he does not seem to have ever acknowledged the fact.

[315] Gopnik and Varnedoe, 183

The men whose work Lichtenstein adapted were not always flattered by his efforts. In 1963 comic artist William Overgard wrote a letter to *Time* that reflects the uncertainty comic artists felt about what Lichtenstein's art was meant to say: "Though he may not, as he says, copy [comic frames] exactly. Lichtenstein in his painting currently being shown at the Guggenheim comes pretty close to the last panel of my Steve Roper Sunday page of August 6,1961. Very flattering…I think?"[316] Comic artists' frustration was compounded by the financial rewards showered on the Pop artists who appropriated their art. While comic artists struggled for increased page rates in order to maintain a basic livelihood, Pop proved to be the most financially successful avant-garde art movement in history, driven as much by dealers and collectors as by the artists themselves. Comic art, it seemed, could be worth thousands of dollars, but only if Roy Lichtenstein had signed it.

Comic creators attempted to push back against Lichtenstein. Comic strip artist Milton Caniff appeared on the May 14 episode of *The Tonight Show* and declared, "it was about time the cartoonists started getting the [moolah] that some pop artists have been getting for 'stealing' from the comics strips."[317] In May of 1965 32 cartoonists held an art show designed to demonstrate their talent in light of Lichtenstein's perceived denigration. Somewhat undermining their defense of comics, however, most of the work displayed was in other, more respected mediums – sculptures and paintings.[318]

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[316] William Overgard, "Letter," *Time Magazine*, 17 May 1963

[317] Jerry Bails "Agent X Reporting #9," *CAPA-Alpha* No. 9, APA publishing 1965, pg 1

[318] Wells, <u>American Comic Book Chronicles: 1965-69</u>

<u>Batman Begins</u>

The most visible manifestation of the mid-60s comic book fad was ABC's prime-time live-action Batman TV series. The program debuted in 1966 and quickly became the most wildly successful comic-book-based media ever created. Producer William Dozier and his collaborators drew heavily from the Pop Art movement in the creation of the program, but the fashionable phenomenon most associated with the program was that of camp. Pop and camp were closely linked in the rhetoric of the day - as the *New York Times* noted, "almost all of Pop art is Camp."[319] For Dozier, camp offered a way to appeal to a dual audience, creating a program children could take seriously and at which adults could giggle, safe from any stigma that might normally be attached to the consumption of such material. Camp served Dozier much as pop served Lichtenstein, allowing them to adapt comic book material while maintaining a safe distance from its cultural connotations.

Appearing as early as 1909 in London and increasingly used as slang in the New York gay community during the 1950s, the concept of camp had begun to find its way into mainstream conversation by the middle of the '60s. The definitive announcement of camp's arrival into broader parlance was Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp." Sontag offered a nuanced discussion of the artistic value of the camp object: "There is a sense in which it is correct to say: It's too good to be Camp." Sontag goes on to explain that "Many examples of Camp are things which, from a 'serious' point of view, are either bad art or kitsch." Sontag complicates this simple association between camp and inferior art as she continues, "Not only is Camp not necessarily bad art, but some art which can be approached as Camp… merits the most serious admiration and study."[320]

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[319] Thomas Meehan, "Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste – It's 'Camp'," *New York Times*, 21 March 1965

[320] Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," <u>Against Interpretation</u>, (New York: Picador, 2001), pg. 275

Since few members of the general public were likely to read Sontag's essay in its original form in the pages of *Partisan Review*, its influence came largely through more widely consumed media sources, which reprinted – and often simplified – her complex formulation. *Time*, for instance, offered a summary of the article to their readers. The *New York Times* introduced the concept to its readership in 1965, as Thomas Meehan explained, "Camp has come along to fill the singular need for a word to describe all those things that, until recently, have loosely been called 'so bad they're good' (e.g., almost any Joan Crawford movie made since 'Mildred Pierce'), 'too much' (the novels of Ronald Firbank), fantastic (the Rockettes) or 'not to be believed' (such headlines in The National Enquirer as 'Madman Cuts Up His Date and Puts Her Body in His Freezer')." Though Meehan delves into the issue in some depth, it is the "so bad they're good" definition that resonated with much of the public, a succinct summary that allowed the middle- and highbrow to enjoy trash without endangering their cultural standing. As Meehan's article continues, it becomes clear that, though ostensibly beyond good and bad tastes, the labelling of items as camp is based, to a considerable extent, on a judgement of its artistic value. The article explains that Bogart films[321] are not camp, "because the films themselves and Bogart in particular are too good to be Camp."[322] The *Los Angeles Times* offered an even simpler description of camp, defining it explicitly in terms of high- and lowbrow taste while offering a scathing commentary on any intellectual who celebrated it as a popular aesthetic: camp is, "a snobbish appreciation by the cognoscenti of something essentially in bad taste or low-brow that is dug by the hoi polloi."[323]

Meehan, like Sontag, rejected the camp credentials of any cultural product intentionally conceived as camp. Though such a proscription may accurately have described the intellectual approach

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[321] In this he disagrees with Sontag, who lists *The Maltese Falcon* as one of the great camp films of all times. Tellingly, the argument is basically over the quality of the original film, whether its artistry saves it from a designation as camp.

[322] Meehan

[323] Hal Humphrey, "Batman and Robin: An Insidious Plot?" *Los Angeles Times*, 24 Jan. 1966, pg c22

to camp, mainstream audiences were more than happy to consume the sanitized, manufactured camp offered up by *Batman*. Almost every article discussing the Dozier-produced program was filled to the brim with mention of camp, and a review of production documents related to the series make clear that that's exactly as Dozier intended.

     Batman's producer William Dozier and his colleagues did not come up with the pop art/ camp approach to Batman, they merely followed an ongoing reinterpretation of the character taking place in the media. When the *Los Angeles Times* announced the program's development in 1965, it described Batman as, "A pop art character from the POW balloon above his head to the Courreges cut of his boots."[324] This assessment was borne out by Columbia's reissue of the 1940s Batman serials. Inspired by Susan Sontag's essay, the studio dug the films out of their vaults and began showing them, one installment at a time, at the Chicago Playboy Club.[325] When this debut proved successful, Columbia packaged the 1943 serial as a single four-hour-and-45-minute film billed as *An Evening With Batman*. The film was a mild sensation, playing to packed audiences of camp-savvy college students and urbanites in art-house venues across the country.[326] Viewers understood the 20-year-old serial through a decidedly contemporary lens, with one student interviewed opining that Batman is, "great pop art. He's super in. He epitomizes super camp."[327] Theatres happily played up the safe viewing position offered by an understanding of camp, with one Baltimore theatre inviting patrons to, "Come to cheer. Stay to Jeer."[328]

     Dozier was convinced that the character of Batman and his originating medium were so infantile that such a camp approach was necessary. In a missive to a colleague Dozier explained that, unlike other

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[324] Art Seidenbaum, "Batman, Sworn Enemy of Crime, Called to TV Battle," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 Sept. 1965 pg. d1

[325] Seymour Krim, "He Flies Again: Batman New Camp Leader," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 Dec. 1965, pg a12

[326] "'Batman' Stirs Action in Candy & Popcorn," *Variety* Vol. 240 Iss. 9, 20 Oct. 1965, pg. 11

[327] "'Super Camp' Batman Flies High Again," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Dec. 1965, pg e18

[328] "Batman and Robin Revival Packs 'Em In," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, 15 Jan. 1966 pg. e16

serialized media like *The Green Hornet* radio program, "the BATMAN comic books were never read by anybody but children."[329] Dozier and his collaborators intended to broaden the character's audience by highlighting his absurd squareness. *The Los Angeles Times* explained the approach: "the cardboard Batman character, 'the purest hero of them all,' has to be played and written on two planes. One, to satisfy the kids' demand for a square-jawed straight shooter. Two, to let the adults in on a joke."[330] The tool for constructing this two-part approach was the knowing use of camp. As *Variety* put it, "'Batman' is being cranked up with all the slam-bang antics kiddies are said to relish, but the overtones are unmistakably aimed for 'camp'-following elders."[331]

Batman's camp approach was not merely designed to provide a safe perspective from which adults might enjoy the program. It was also specifically aimed at the small subset of adults who considered themselves intellectuals and members of the avant-garde, echoing the pop art of Lichtenstein and Warhol in offering them a way to indulge in "trash" without sullying their cache of cultural capital. Camp was, as Sontag had pointed out, "a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it."[332] ABC catered a significant portion of its publicity efforts for *Batman* to the New York intelligentsia, holding a "pop art" showing of *Batman* comic panels at the Guggenheim and staging a "cocktail and frug party" at Harlow's discotheque, complete with a sanctifying visit from Andy Warhol.[333] *Backstage* described the network's very expensive marketing push: "The 'in' group was led to believe it was high camp, the kids cuddled up to it and the rest of the people, fed up with what has been offered, seemed to be willing to try

[329] William Dozier to Edward Bleier, 14 July 1966, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[330] Seidenbaum d1

[331] "Dozier's 'Batman' to Wink at that Unserved Minority The 'Camp' Set," *Variety* Vol. 241 Iss. 4, 15 Dec. 1965, pg. 42

[332] Sontag

[333] Val Adams, "Discotheque Frug Party Heralds Batman's Film and TV Premiere," *New York Times*, 13 Jan. 1966 pg 79

anything at least once for a change of pace."[334] *The Los Angeles Times* concurred but went further, suggesting that *Batman* might redeem the entire television medium for the intelligentsia: "Television is contriving an insidious campaign to convince sophisticates that the medium is really for them. The fact that are [sic] millions of kids, tennis-shoed little old ladies and Lewisian Babbits watching avidly is not only accidental, but incidental, they are being told."[335]

        Batman's creators frequently spoke of the program's camp approach to the source material. During the TV series' development, Dozier and the other creators working on the project referred to themselves in internal communications as "camp followers."[336] As described by the show's head writer Lorenzo Semple, Jr., the program was "so gorgeously square that it's hip; so far Out that it's In."[337] Semple elaborated on this idea after reviewing a script in which the writer's winks at the adult audience were too direct, falling into the trap of, "kidding ourselves consciously." Semple declared, "I see now, appeal on sophisticated level must come from inherent juvenility of story-line. I amend my advice. Let this be new advice to BatWriters: THE ONLY LEVEL YOU SHOULD WRITE ON IS A GOOD FLAT TABLE!"[338] This was the heart of Batman's approach to camp, to stretch the sincerity of the program to levels that were so absurd that a knowing adult audience could safely find them amusing.

        Producing a series with a camp sensibility posed problems for Dozier and his colleagues. Camp was, of course, intimately linked to the gay male community. British film critic Jack Babuscio described camp as, "those elements in a person, situation, or activity that express, or are created by, a gay

[334] "ABC Bats Up Ratings," *Backstage* Vol. 7, Iss. 3, 21 Jan. 1966, pg.10

[335] Humphrey c22

[336] William Dozier to Harve Bennett, 15 Oct. 1965, Dozier collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[337] Lorenzo Semple Jr. to William Dozier, undated, Dozier collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[338] Lorenzo Semple Jr. to William Dozier, 22 Nov. 1965, Dozier collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

sensibility," a perspective Babuscio defines as "a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is colored, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one's gayness."[339] Dozier and his collaborators had no intention of validating or popularizing such a viewpoint, seeking to use camp only for its trendiness and its usefulness in accommodating a duel audience. *Batman*'s producers were keenly aware of the need to control the implications of the camp approach and reminded one another it was vital the program not "over-camp."[340] In particular, Batman and Robin's partnership must remain winkingly close without actually going so far as to depict a healthy, heroic gay relationship. Reacting to an early outline from the series' head writer Lorenzo Semple Jr., Dozier and various "ABC people" stressed that, "We would like to build up the Bruce and Molly relationship for its romantic content and also for its normalizing effect on Bruce." As for the Boy Wonder, he would be normalized by playing up his "attractiveness to teen-age chicks."[341] The message was not lost on Semple, who replied, "I quite understand what you mean by 'normalizing' Bruce."[342] Harve Bennett, ABC's Director of Network Program Development, Western Division and one of the aforementioned "ABC people," was particularly concerned with the possibility of over-camping and suggested revisions of the pilot script, indirectly referencing the accusations made by Fredric Wertham about the pair's relationship: "In view of the public press and rumors about Bruce and Dick…, let's have Batman on page 37 hit upon some other explanation of where he and Dick spent the night.

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[339] Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality, ed. David Bergman, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pg. 19

[340] Harve Bennett to William Dozier, 14 Oct. 1965, Dozier collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[341] William Dozier to Lorenzo Semple Jr., 23 July 1965, Dozier collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[342] Lorenzo Semple Jr. to William Dozier, undated, Dozier collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

None of us is sure about Bill Jackson and the whole Blue Eagle softball team."[343] As they developed a

second superhero series, *The Green Hornet* (1966-1967), Dozier and his ABC partners made sure to note

that this new hero should be played "straighter."[344] Critics remarked upon the care with which the

program's creators took in controlling the implications of the series' camp, with one noting, "The

producers took pains to dispel any homosexual inference to be drawn from the Bat-Robin combo"[345]

Camp's connection to the gay community remained, however, and *Batman*'s detractors were

quick to point it out. A *Los Angeles Times* article railing against camp in general and *Batman* in

particular featured harsh remarks against the program from Buck Henry, the creator of rival crime-stopper

comedy *Get Smart* (1965-1970). In his pointed critique of the show, Henry helpfully explains, "Did you

know, by the way… that camp was originally a homosexual code word?" Henry goes on to opine that the

term was a way for "that group" to explain away the horrible results brought about after they "infiltrated"

and ruined the Broadway theatre. The *Times* article proceeds to quote the most salacious sections of

Fredric Wertham's comments regarding the connection between Batman and Robin; the psychiatrist had

labeled the relationship between the two men a "wish-dream of two homosexuals living together."[346]

Dozier, faced with questions regarding a version of camp that retains elements of its non-heteronormative

origins, lied and claimed the term never crossed his mind as he developed the program.[347] Dozier would

continually plead ignorance regarding Batman's camp undertones – promoting *The Green Hornet*, the

producer promised, "This will not be a camp show – whatever that is."[348] As the *Los Angeles Time* piece

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[343] Harve Bennett to William Dozier, 14 Oct. 1965, Dozier collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[344] Harve Bennett to William Dozier, 30 March 1966, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[345] "Batman Review," *Variety*, 19 Jan. 1966

[346] Wertham

[347] Humphrey c22

[348] Aleene MacMinn, "Green Hornet Buzzing Into Batman Domain," *Los Angeles Times* 30 April 1966 pg. b3

proved, camp, even in the watered-down version peddled by the creators of *Batman*, still carried transgressive undertones.

Batman premiered in January 1966 and proved an instant hit, scoring high ratings for the third-place ABC. A host of *Batman*-themed records hit the market, the "Batusi" dance found its way into discos, Batman made the cover of *Life Magazine*, and licensed goods from the program were expected to sell more than the $50 million James Bond had moved.[349] Batman bread, Batman Cola, and Batman milk all made appearances on store shelves.[350] St. Laurent rolled out a line of Batman-inspired dresses, outfits, "as brutal as Batman and Superman," promoted in an ad complete with comic-style onomatopoeia – "ZOWIE! ZAP!"[351] When FCC Chairman E. William Henry resigned, LBJ's fashion adviser Mrs. Edmond Howie threw him a *Batman*-themed farewell party, attended by "Mrs. Edward M. Kennedy, Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy," Robert Vaughn, and Arthur Schlesinger – all but the last bedecked in suitably super costumes. Chairman Henry, of course, was Batman.[352]

Media critics proved less eager to embrace the new program then did the general public. Indeed, *Batman*'s association with television and pop art was taken by many critics as a damning indictment of those two institutions. Variety wrote, "While no one concerned with the higher possibilities of the TV medium can rejoice in the arrival of such a show as "Batman," at least the new series carries the respectability of admitting what it is… there's somehow less to get mad at when a series does not pretend to be anything more than one of the lowest forms of literature." The *Washington Post*'s Lawrence Laurent was far less kind, describing *Batman* as what happens when, "the poorest kind of published trash

[349] "'Batman' Merchandising Bonanza to Surpass 'James Bond' Record Take," *Variety* Vol. 242 Iss. 1, 23 Feb. 1966, pg. 1

[350] "'Batman' Invades Pantry," *Variety* Vol. 245 Iss. 4, 14 Dec. 1966, Pg. 28

[351] "St. Laurent Ad," *Women's Wear Daily*, 1 Aug. 1966

[352] Myra Macpherson, "F.C.C.'s Caped Crusader is Honored," *New York Times*, 27 April 1966, pg. 51

becomes the basis for a worse television series." Laurent harkened back to FCC Chairman Newton Minow's famous condemnation of television as he declared Batman was the final triumph of the "vast wasteland," the sign that television producers had abandoned any pretense of quality and given in to their basest instincts. Laurent also saw in *Batman* a damning condemnation of Pop Art itself, a judgement other critics shared. John Morgan, writing for *The Sunday Times*, saw *Batman* as the "greatest triumph of the fatuities of Pop," and as such an indictment not only of Pop Art, but of America itself, a sign that America had given in to "the cynical and mindless."[353] Film critic Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times* decried pop and camp as a barbaric assault on the boundaries between high and mass art, bemoaning, "an upside-down world in which bad is good and good is bad and old is new and new is stale." Pop Art, "has become a snob word for enthusing over bad taste." As for camp, Champlin not particularly subtly labeled it, "a bent and supercilious view of the world."[354]

Critical caveats mattered far less than ratings, and in the immediate wake of Batman's success it seemed that the television schedule was about to be jammed full of comic book superstars. NBC began work on *Tarzan*, *Li'l Abner*, *Fearless Fosdick*, and Dozier's own *Dick Tracy* while CBS developed its own superhero, Mr. Terrific. King Features eagerly pushed properties like Mandrake the Magician at interested producers.[355] In the end, *Batman* spawned few imitators. Even before a wave of concern about violence in children's television disinclined programmers and producers from creating new action adventure shows, most TV executives were convinced *Batman*'s success was a fluke. [356] The consensus was that Dozier's approach had been the only way to successfully adapt a comic property, and the makers of *Batman* had over-saturated the market with camp heroics, airing multiple new episodes each week.

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[353] John Morgan, "The End of the Pop Road," *The Sunday Times,* 30 Jan. 1966.

[354] Charles Champlin, "Taking a Bat at Batman… Plonk!" *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Feb. 1966.

[355] Les Brown, "TV Serious About Funnies," *Variety* Vol. 240 Iss. 13, 17 Nov. 1965, pg. 25

[356] "No 'Camp' Followers," *Variety* Vol. 242 Iss. 3, 9 March 1966 pg. 27

Producers were convinced that a more conventional translation of comic-book material would find no adult audience. As William Self, a 20th Century Fox executive involved in Batman's production opined, "If others try to turn comic strips into TV series, they'll just be imitating 'Batman' and that won't work."[357]

Batman's potential to inspire imitators was also hindered by its mid-season debut. By the time it proved a hit, the networks had already ordered their pilots for the '66-'67 season, and *Batman*'s ratings dropped so quickly that it was struggling when programmers considered shows for the '67-'68 season. By the end of 1966 – less than a year after its first appearance – *Batman* was on its last legs. Advertisers investing in the new program *The Flying Nun*, scheduled to follow *Batman*, were convinced the caped crusader's plummeting ratings would prevent the Sally Field vehicle from becoming a hit.[358] *Batman*, which Variety wrote may have experienced "the shortest cycle ever for a hot fad show on tv,"[359] stumbled on for a year before airing its final episode in March of 1968. Ultimately, prime time television saw only a few *Batman* imitators which quickly vanished. [360] Dozier's own *Green Hornet* failed to find an audience, but he wasn't ready to give up on comic book properties yet. With *Batman* cancelled, Dozier turned his attention to Wonder Woman – "the one," in Dozier's words, "that ends them all."[361]

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[357] Lawrence Laurent, "Fox TV Operation Out of That Slump," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 25 Jan. 1966

[358] "It's Odds-On: Batman is Out," Variety Vol. 246 Iss. 4, 15 March 1967, pg. 36

[359] "It's Odds-On: Batman is Out" pg 36

[360] *The Monkees* (1966-1968), which debuted several months after *Batman*, seems to have replicated some of the superhero program's colorful, campy approach to its material.

[361] Charles Champlin, "Batman's Boss Bats the Tube," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 May 1966, pg. d10

The creators of TV's *Batman*, like the majority of Americans, had little respect for the comics they were adapting or for the creators that produced them. Dozier was not shy about his opinion of the media that had birthed his new star character, telling an interviewer, "the comic books he's read as research have been horrible."[362] In a letter to Dozier regarding a newly completed script, Semple Jr. lamented, "It took good deal of brain-power to adapt flimsy mag-story to our pattern."[363] Few things irritated Semple more than writers following the original comic too closely. Critiquing a recently submitted script from one of the show's writers, Semple explained, "I realize increasingly the gulf between comic-book Batman stories and our own: Hodge has followed comic books and/or N.Y. outlines in good faith. In Batwriting, as in certain other things, I fear good faith is not enough."[364] The poetic conventions of the comics differed dramatically from those of television, and in most cases, Semple made clear, the writing found in the original work was decidedly sub-par. Similarly, when developing *The Green Hornet* for TV, Semple and Dozier agreed to largely ignore the comics, which Semple disliked, and be guided by the radio program.[365]

As suggested by their attitude towards the comics, Dozier was careful to keep DC at arms-length and, as far as possible, ignore their input. When Allen Ducovny, DC's media liaison, deferentially requested a copy of the first draft script of the planned *Batman* feature, Dozier explained to a colleague

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[362] Seidenbaum d1

[363] Lorenzo Semple Jr. to William Dozier, 12 Nov. 1965, Dozier collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[364] Lorenzo Semple Jr. to "Bat-Execs," 15 Nov. 1965, Dozier collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[365] William Dozier to Lorenzo Semple Jr., 16 Nov. 1965, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

that, as he was under no contractual obligation to do so, he had no intention of sending Ducovny a script; "there is no point in inviting his niggling criticisms."[366] Indeed, Dozier argued that, since it was the television show that drove the popularity of other ancillary media like the Batman newspaper comic, the show's producers deserved a cut of the profits from such endeavors.[367]

When forced to consider the process that produced the Batman comic books, Dozier, Semple, and the other creators attached to the television series understood the character through the ideal of the romantic author. From the viewpoint of the producers of TV's *Batman*, the comic-based Batman and every story in which he appeared had only one original author, Bob Kane. Kane was one of the few comic creators prior to Lee who had successfully attached his name to his work in a way which transcended the immediate environs of the comic industry. In many ways, Kane was a dark reflection of Lee. Unlike Lee, Kane loathed artistic collaboration and had turned down offers to become part of a comic company several times during his life.[368] This preference for artistic autonomy (or at least the illusion of it), coupled with a lack of the sense of security Lee enjoyed as a member of management at one of the major comic publishers, made Kane desperate to hide the contributions of his artistic collaborators. As a result, Kane demonstrated all the undesirable traits often unfairly attributed to Lee. As Daniel Stein explains, Kane, like Lee, skillfully used the paratext of the Batman comics to attach himself inextricably to the character.[369] Kane was an unusually astute businessman, and he was able to retain partial ownership of the character, an incredible rarity in the comic industry.[370] His business acumen was not matched by any particular artistic ability, however, and Kane farmed out the actual

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[366] William Dozier to Jim Fisher, 11 April 1966, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[367] William Dozier to Bob Kane, 13 June 1966, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[368] Jones 140

[369] Daniel Stein, "Superhero Comics and the Authorizing Functions of the Comic Book Paratext," From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels, eds. Daniel Stein, Jan-Noel Thon (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015)

[370] Les Daniels, Batman: The Complete History, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004)

creation of Batman stories to a variety of ghost-writers and -artists. The most significant of these was Bill Finger, who co-created the character of Batman. Unlike Lee, who often, if imperfectly, publicized his colleagues, Kane lied and manipulated to keep Finger and his other collaborators' contributions secret, going as far as forging documents and drawings to hide their involvement.[371] Where Lee reveled in engagement with fans, in 1965 Kane was very publicly threatening legal action against the fan-zine *Batmania*, which had recently begun to uncover the story of Finger's involvement in Batman's creation.

Dozier and his colleagues knew little and cared less about the drama playing out in the fan press; as far as they were concerned, Kane was the author of Batman. Kane, never slow to claim credit, nimbly grabbed his share of the acclaim for the new approach to the character as he wrote to Dozier, "I read the shooting script for the pilot and although it is not the mysterious and grim Batman that I have lived with all these years, I realize that your version is an updated 'camp style' …and that if I were to produce it today, I would do it very much the way you are handling the concept – tongue-in-cheek – along with the pop art feeling."[372] Kane did have a few complaints about the program, of course –the comic creator opined that his name was not on screen long enough during the credits.[373] Seeking to take advantage of Kane's association with the character, Dozier enlisted Kane and Finger to write a script for the program. After accepting the assignment, Kane flew off to Florida and left Finger to complete the writing entirely on his own. When Dozier learned of this, he was enraged; he explained to Kane that his only interest in working with him was, "because of your identification with the property." Finger was of no use whatsoever, as Dozier told Kane, "If it had not been for you, I would never have encouraged the involvement."[374] It escaped Dozier's notice that a script written by Finger but credited to Kane would

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[371] Jones

[372] Bob Kane to William Dozier, 2 Nov. 1965, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[373] William Dozier to Bob Kane, 13 June 1966, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[374] William Dozier to Bob Kane, 13 April 1966, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

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provide the most accurate reflection of the comic-book Batman possible. Kane was able to parlay the success of Batman into a development deal for a new cartoon property known as *Cool McCool,* while Finger continued to work in obscurity.[375]

Dozier and his collaborators had even less time for comic creators unattached to the Batman property. Jerry Siegel, the perpetually struggling co-creator of Superman, wrote to Richard Zanuck, President of *Batman*-producer Fox, to pathetically inquire, "would you be interested in my services either as a consultant, scripter, editor or other capacity in super-hero TV projects you may be contemplating?" His entreaties went unanswered.

During *Batman*'s run, Dozier began developing other comic-based properties, including a television version of Dick Tracy. The difference in the producer's attitude towards those associated with the Batman comic and towards Dick Tracy creator Chester Gould reflected the continued gulf in mainstream perceptions of the prestige of newspaper comics and comic books. Where Dozier was dismissive at best of anyone connected with the comic Batman, he fawned over Gould, checking with the creator to make sure the planned program got every detail of his vision correct. When Gould sent a series of original drawings of the *Dick Tracy* characters to Dozier, the producer replied, "This is something I shall treasure long after the series has been forgotten."[376]

Most comic creators had as little respect for Dozier as he had for them. The television producer's camp-reliant approach to Batman found few fans within the comic industry. Andy Medhurst has pointed out that a strong current of homophobia underlay comic creators' and fans' resistance to the TV Batman,

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[375] "ABC Bats Up Ratings" pg 10

[376] William Dozier to Chester Gould, 13 July 1966, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

as the "unreconstructed devotee[s] of the Batman" rejected the "effeminizing of the cowled avenger."[377] Also contributing to the resentment directed at the television series, however, was an understanding of Dozier's assumption that the source material could only be enjoyed by adults as an object of mockery.

Although Dozier's *Batman* helped create a superhero-friendly zeitgeist that brought press attention to Marvel's new pantheon and furthered its cross-media endeavors, Lee shared in the comic industry's general distaste for the program. Like many members of the comic industry, he would spend several decades trying to move beyond the satirical, distanced approach Dozier had taken to the comic book material and to shake off the gloss of absurdity the program had placed on all superheroes. Asked if he felt *Batman*'s success "affected comics being taken seriously," Lee responded, "I don't think it did comics any good, no. It held them up to ridicule, it was almost like saying, 'Look how silly these things are.'" Bemoaning a failed live-action Spider-Man program from the late '70s, Lee would place some of the blame on the producers' lack of faith in the material and their attempts to attract an older viewership with a much more subdued version of Dozier's approach, packing the program with "Batman-type" music that gave the program a "campy feeling."[378] Of course, Lee was more than willing to set aside any animosity regarding *Batman* if it contributed to launching a successful adaptation of his own material, and in 1980 the editor happily engaged in talks with Adam West about starring in a proposed television series as Daredevil or as a new hero created especially for the straight-faced actor.[379]

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[377] Andy Medhurst, "Batman, Deviance, and Camp," The Many Lives of the Batman, eds. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991)

[378] Steve Swires, "Interview: Stan Lee," *Genesis* Vol. 6, Iss. 7, Feb 1979, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[379] Stan Lee to Robert Miller, Adam West Productions, 24 Oct. 1980, Stan Lee Collection American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Batman's success did little to help Marvel's heroes find a place on the prime-time schedule - they were too new to fully benefit from the flurry of nostalgia that drove *Batman*'s brief popularity. As Stan Lee explained to a packed Princeton audience in 1966, sponsors remained completely unaware of Marvel despite *Batman*'s success; "We're so in that we haven't reached the general public yet."[380] Nevertheless, the mainstream interest in comics did present the opportunity for Marvel's first successful foray onto television, as the characters Lee helped to create found a place in the rapidly changing field of children's TV.

In television's earliest days, programming aimed at children had been a key component of evening viewing. Shows like *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie* found approval from adults and children alike. Gradually, children's shows were moved to Saturday morning while their evening slots were taken up by more profitable, adult-oriented shows, and by 1954 Saturday morning programming aimed at children had begun in earnest.[381] Initially full of live-action programs, within a year cartoons began to establish a strengthening beachhead on Saturday morning. The shift was occasioned by the success of the animation-heavy *Disneyland* television program as well as the decision by multiple movie studios to make their backlog of cartoons, originally created for theatrical exhibition, available for television programmers.[382] Animation studios aimed at creating content for television began to proliferate shortly thereafter, offering a refuge for animators left without work by the collapse of theatrical animation.

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[380] "Stan Lee at Princeton, 1966: Steve Ditko's Departure Announced," *youtube*, 28 Dec. 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A73KehrmpOU

[381] Art Woodstone, "NBC Makes Just Like Nighttime in Preeming Sat. Ayem Kidvid Block," *Variety*, 24 Nov. 1954, pg. 27

[382] "Animated Cartoons Jumping," *Variety*, 21 Sept. 1955

In the early '60s, the amount of programming the networks aimed at children began to expand dramatically, rising from a combined 15 hours in 1962 to double that four years later.[383] No individual did more to define the shape of children's television in the '60s then Fred Silverman. In 1963, the 25-year-old wunderkind was hired to helm CBS's daytime schedule on the strength of an unsolicited analysis of the network's program schedule.[384] Silverman moved quickly to complete animation's takeover of Saturday morning, and for the '64-'65 season he filled a block of programming from 9 AM to noon with an uninterrupted string of cartoons.[385] Instead of the now-standard replays of theatrical cartoons, Silverman made the bold move of commissioning a slate of new animated programs. Silverman's programming block was wildly successful, garnering high ratings and earning $20 million for the network. [386] Silverman's success prompted the other networks to quickly alter their own schedule to follow suit, filling Saturday morning with cartoons. Suddenly, Saturday morning was no longer a programming backwater but one of the key battlegrounds between the three networks.

At the very moment that superheroes enjoyed a comic book resurgence, the rise of animation-heavy Saturday morning programming blocks offered a media outlet that could adapt their fantastical adventures without accruing prohibitive expenses. When ABC's Saturday morning roster eclipsed Silverman's CBS slate thanks to *The Beatles* (1965-1969), the programmer sought out a pre-sold property that could counter the quartet's popularity. Silverman recalled the success of fantastic serialized radio shows like *Buck Rogers* and, casting about for the nearest contemporary counterpart, latched onto Superman.[387] Silverman was reaffirmed in his choice by the continued success of the live-action

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[383] Jack Pitman, "Saturday Kidvid in the Big Time," *Variety*, 12 Oct. 1966, pg. 34

[384] Val Adams, "25-Year-Old Wins Key Post at CBS," *New York Times*, 12 April 1963, pg. 41

[385] "CBS-TV Plans Changes in Saturday A.M. Lineup," *Broadcasting* vol. 60 Iss. 19, 6 April 1964 pg. 92

[386] "CBS-TV Sat. Ayem Cartoon Windfall," *Variety* Vol. 236 Iss. 13, 18 Nov. 1964, pg. 27

[387] "Animated Super-Heroes Conquer Kiddie's Saturday Block," *Broadcasting* Vol. 72 Iss. 21, 22 May 1967, pg. 66

Superman series in syndication, and commissioned the *New Adventures of Superman* (1966-1970).[388] The young programmer tapped the struggling young Filmation studios to produce the series, cementing the animation house's fortunes and making them a major player in the increasingly competitive field of children's animation. A little under a month before the debut of ABC's live-action *Batman* series brought costumed adventurers briefly back into the mainstream of American pop-culture consciousness, Silverman demonstrated the prescience that would make him a fixture of the television industry for decades by building his Saturday morning slate around superheroes. Silverman invested $5 million in a collection of shows including *Underdog* (1964-1967), *Frankenstein Jr and the Impossibles* (1966-1968), *Space Ghost* (1966-1968), *The Lone Ranger* (1966-1969), - and *Superman*.[389] Breaking more new ground, Silverman took out major advertising for the animated slate in all of Marvel's comics.[390] Silverman's superheroes promptly trounced all competition, even vanquishing the mop-topped Liverpuddlians.[391] Variety declared Silverman the "only… network programming hero"[392] of the season, and animation producers were quick to follow the CBS programmer's lead and began eagerly grabbing any superhero properties in sight or creating entirely new ones. The networks filled their lineups with *Super-6* (1966-1969), *Super President* (1967-1968), *Birdman* (1967-1969), *Mightor* (1967-1969), and *The Herculoids* (1967-1969).

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[388] "CBS-TV, Socked By 'Beatles,' Calls on Fresh 'Superman,'" *Variety* Vol. 241 Iss. 5, 22 Dec. 1965, pg. 27

[389] "CBS Sees a Super-Hero Trend & It Lands Like a Block of Shows on Kids," *Variety* Vol. 242 Iss. 5, 23 March 1966, pg. 24

[390] "Fred Silverman," *Archive of American Television*, http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-silverman#

[391] "Saturday Morning a CBS Runaway," *Variety* Vol. 244 Iss. 4, 14 Sept. 1966, pg. 31

[392] "Hi-Yo Silverman," *Variety* Vol. 244 Iss. 13, 16 Nov. 1966, pg. 27

Almost as soon as *The Fantastic Four* debuted in 1961, fans began toying with the possibility of translating them to other media. As one Brooklyn fan proclaimed, "The characters in the FF seem so real to me, that I've been trying to decide who should play their roles when they get into the movies. [393] (And it better be SOON.)"[394] Lee was more than happy to encourage such discussion. One of Lee's first, teasing mentions of Marvel movies came in response to a letter from young fan Gerry Conway, a future Marvel writer and Editor-in-Chief, inquiring about a passage in the MMMS newsletter indicating that, "a motion picture company wants to produce a movie about some of our heroes." Lee elaborated, "we've had movie offers for just about *all* our characters, but can't give any details out yet until the contracts are definitely signed."[395] In truth, in the mid-60s Lee was still a relatively low-level employee in the Goodman publishing empire, kept distant from any possible Marvel television or film deals. Responding to an interviewer's 1965 inquiry into whether any film or television producers had expressed interest in Marvel properties, Lee demurred: "I don't know. The front office may have had some…. It's nothing that I really discuss with them until the thing is definite."[396]

Shortly after Lee pled ignorance, the first opportunity to translate Marvel's properties to television – or, indeed, to any other media – presented itself. Producers Steve Krantz and the Grantray-Lawrence animation studio expressed interest in producing animated children's programs based on Marvel's intellectual properties. Lee threw himself into the adaptation process with considerable abandon

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[393] This particular fan's cast was an odd assortment of A-, B-, and C-list actors, with Gregory Peck as Mister Fantastic, Troy Donahue as The Human Torch, Steeve Reeves as The Thing, and Tuesday Weld as The Invisible Girl.

[394] "Prisoners of the Puppet Master!"

[395] "The Return of Doctor Doom"

[396] White 8

– even if these shows were cheap kid's stuff, they were still television. While Marvel's early animated efforts would gratify Lee's need for recognition beyond the marginalized field of the comic industry, they would also mark a decisive step in the deterioration of his relationship with his co-creators; the collaborative process that produced Marvel's comics became muddled and obscured as they were translated to television.

Steve Krantz was a former programming executive with NBC and Screen Gems. In 1966, he was employed as video consultant for *McCall's Magazine*, in which capacity he worked closely with producer William Dozier, who had a deal to develop and coproduce properties derived from *McCall's* and its sister publications. In 1966, Dozier was enjoying wild success as he oversaw production of the live-action Batman series. Krantz had been observing the surge of interest in comics over the course of the early '60s and moved to acquire the animated television rights for a variety of characters that would eventually include Batman, DC's innovative Metamorpho, and the Marvel heroes.

To produce the animation for the Marvel program, Krantz partnered with animation studio Grantray-Lawrence. Grantray-Lawrence was the creation of Bob Lawrence, a producer who had, among other achievements, produced the first TV commercial for a presidential candidate, a 1948 spot for Harold Stassen, and would go on to create Monitel, the first home shopping television channel. Lawrence, seeking to ride the wave of Pop he saw in the art of Warhol and Lichtenstein, approached Martin Goodman with the proposal for the program and was amazed at how little the publisher valued the intellectual property he controlled. As Lawrence explains, "…they didn't know what they had and where to go. Believe it or not, in this contract I was able to obtain participation in the merchandising rights, and continuing interest in it."[397] This first licensing contract would mark the start of a pattern that would continue for decades, as Martin Goodman, his son Chip, and subsequent Marvel owners remained

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[397] McGovern 46

myopically focused on their more respectable publications and dramatically undervalued the Marvel properties, signing a series of absurdly generous contracts with individuals on the fringes of the entertainment industry.

Lawrence set out to economically produce 65 half-hours of *The Marvel Super Heroes*, which would feature alternating segments starring Captain America, Namor the Sub-Mariner, Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk, and Thor. In order to keep budgets low, the new generation of cartoons being produced specifically for television were defined by limited animation, a sharp contrast to the flowing, intricate theatrical animation produced by Disney, Warner Bros., and other film studios during the '30s and '40s. Grantray-Lawrence's animation for *The Marvel Super Heroes* was simplistic even by the standards of the time, produced through a method the studio proudly touted as "Xerography." Grantray-Lawrence converted comic book illustrations themselves into cells, making slight variations to the image to give the impression of motion. This limited animation, credited euphemistically as "Story Adaptation," was the work of a single animator, June Patterson. The result was startlingly amateurish, with the only interest in the image coming from the creative strength of original artists such as Kirby, Ditko, Gene Colan and Don Heck. While the four men were listed in the program's end credits, they were not financially compensated in any way. [398]

Like the artists, Lee's work on the program was considered part of his normal duties and he received no extra compensation. Nevertheless, Lee undertook his work on this first Marvel adaptation enthusiastically, overseeing production closely. Much of the program's dialogue was taken directly from the scripts Lee had written for the original comics. Where changes were needed, Lee altered his own original version. The most common alteration made in the dialogue was necessitated by the differences in the poetics dominant in comics and television at the time. Comics, and particularly those published by

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[398] Michael Eury, Hero-A-Go-Go: Campy Comic Books, Crimefighters, & the Culture of the Swinging 60's, (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing 2017), pg. 239

Marvel, thrived on intense seriality, presenting open-ended stories that often left key elements of the plot unresolved. Animated television, on the other hand, offered a series of episodes complete in themselves, introducing and resolving plotlines in a single half-hour. In his first foray into television, Lee was tasked with rewriting his formerly open-ended tales to provide closure. As he explained, "[the comic stories] have to be changed to some degree because some of them aren't complete in themselves. And the animation studio has to change the ending or… it has to seem as if it's a complete episode."[399]

It had not been Lee's writing that intrigued Lawrence – he had been gripped by Kirby's art. Even more than Lee, Kirby, who lacked Lee's relative job security, was desperate to jump into other media, and *The Marvel Super Heroes* seemed to offer the first glimmer of hope that this might be possible. As comic creator and long-time Kirby friend Mark Evanier explained, Jack had always maintained that what he was doing in comics was the blueprint for a movie; "[that] a producer could take any given four-issue arc in Thor or Fantastic Four and just shoot it, and not only have the movie plotted, but storyboarded and designed, and this [cartoon] was the first proof Jack had that his belief as correct."[400] *Marvel Super Heroes* producer Steve Lawrence unwittingly agreed with Kirby as he responded to criticisms regarding the program's very limited animation: "Why change anything?... The people that work for comic books are great art directors, great cameramen. They have a tremendous feel for continuity, for action. Their work gives the impression of movement…"[401]

Kirby soon came to the realization that adaptation into other media obscured the collaborative creative process of the comic industry and denied the privileges of authorship to participants such as Kirby, who lacked Lee's managerial role and prominent public profile. Though it had been Kirby's art that first intrigued him, Lawrence never met, let alone worked with, Kirby or any of Marvel's other

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[399] White 8

[400] McGovern 46

[401] "'Super-Heroes' On the Way," *Broadcasting* Vol. 71 Iss. 9, 29 Aug. 1966, pg 68

artists. And while neither Lee or Kirby received any extra payment for the show, Lee at least enjoyed a degree of continued control over the characters and the recognition of the producers.

The Marvel Super Heroes debuted in syndication on September 1, 1966 and found immediate success, with syndicators snapping up the cartoon. RKO General Broadcasting, which had stations in New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Boston, and Memphis, made one of the largest purchases of cartoons in TV history when it bought 195 of the six-and-a-half minute segments for a million dollars.[402]

Krantz and Lawrence had realized early in the process of adapting the Marvel properties that Spider-Man was too valuable to be wasted as a mere portion of an anthology series, and on September 9, 1967 the animated *Spider-Man* premiered on ABC and became the second property co-created by Lee to find its way onto television screens and the first to enter the thriving Saturday morning superhero cartoon market. Following the program's successful first season, Krantz ended his relationship with Grantray-Lawrence and continued the program under the auspices of his own Krantz Films, hiring a young Ralph Bakshi to helm the project.[403] To cut costs, the second and third seasons of the program recycled footage from Bakshi's cartoon *Rocket Robin Hood* (1966-1969). Instead of battling his normal rogues gallery, Spider-Man now spent most of his time squaring off against a generic cast of malevolent aliens. A few years later, Krantz and Bakshi would collaborate on a very different comic property as producer and director of the 1972 animated film *Fritz the Cat*.

The final animated program accompanying Marvel's mid-60s peak in public visibility was produced by perhaps the era's leader in limited animation, Hanna-Barbera. *The Fantastic Four*, which debuted on ABC on September 9, 1967, was part of the networks desperate attempt to reclaim its former first place from the Fred Silverman-led CBS and its full slate of superhero cartoons. *The Fantastic*

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[402] "RKO, Krantz Films: $1,000,000 Deal," *Back Stage* Vol. 7 Iss. 12, 25 Mar. 1966, pg. 3

[403] "Krantz Films Expands into TV Production," *Broadcasting* Vol. 70 Iss. 15, 11 April 1966, pg. 106

Four's end credits presented the program as "based on an idea by" Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and the program directly adapted a number of the stories the pair had co-created in the comics.

Lee would attempt to follow the success of *The Marvel Super Heroes* and *Spider-Man* by creating several original animated properties, including a horror-tinged swashbuckler called *Nighthawk*, with producer Grantray-Lawrence. By 1968, however, the sort of violent, if fantastical, fare in which Marvel and Lee specialized was now considered toxic by programmers, and Marvel's three programs soon joined a variety of DC-inspired fare as well as derivative superhero TV shows such as *Space Ghost* in cancellation.

<u>The Vast Wasteland</u>

While it might not be the culturally acclaimed outlet Lee had dreamed of, in the years following *The Marvel Super Heroes*' debut in 1966 it seemed that comic book heroes had found a stable second home in children's cartoons. This moment passed quickly, as public anxiety about violence in children's television mounted dramatically during the mid- and late-60s. According to television industry lore, the turn against TV violence came on June 6, 1968, when Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated at Los Angeles's Ambassador Hotel. 1968 was undeniably a year riven with crisis. The liberal icon's death, a bitter echo of his brother's violent passing five years earlier, was the tragic cap to a year that had seen Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated and the televised atrocities of the Tet Offensive. Todd Gitlin describes 1968 as the "apocalyptic year," when "extremity was the commonplace style… the rhetoric of showdown and recklessness prevailed. The end always lay near. The zeitgeist screamed until it was hoarse."[404] Americans desperate to explain the seemingly incomprehensible torrent of mayhem and conflict and unable or unwilling to grapple with deeper and more systemic causes turned their attention

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[404] Todd Gitlin, <u>The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage</u>, (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), pg. 287

towards culture industries that seemed to be contributing to the era's sense of omnipresent, inescapable

brutality. The Motion Picture Production Code, which for decades had governed the amount of violence

and other objectionable material Hollywood featured in its films, had been enforced less and less over the

course of the '60s before being abandoned entirely in 1968. Films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) depicted

a degree of cruelty and gore that would have been unthinkable 15 years earlier. Perhaps worst of all,

television, a medium that penetrated into the sacred space of the home, seemed intent on pushing images

of violence and conflict onto America's children via a seemingly ceaseless stream of superhero programs.

Scholar Heather Hendershot explains that there was some logic to the notion that RFK's death

caused a widespread reconsideration of the role of children's television. Kennedy was widely depicted in

the media as a devoted family man and had worked with FCC commissioner Newton Minow to improve

children's television. But Hendershot also warns against the simple monocausal explanation

programmers, producers, and other television industry insiders posit to account for the backlash against

children's television and the subsequent effort to put tighter controls on material aimed at young

audiences.[405] Examining media reactions to Silverman's dramatic redesign of Saturday morning

television reveals the validity of Hendershot's assertion – concerns about the frivolousness and violence

of children's programming were prevalent years before Robert Kennedy's death, and these worries were

exacerbated by a growing sense of a nation descending into chaos that existed prior to the assassinations

of 1968.

In the '50s and early '60s, children's TV had found wide approval among the general public. A

1954 study by the Communications Research Project and sponsored by the National Council of Churches

of Christ found that 69% of parents approved of television aimed at children. In 1961, a study by two

professors of human development found that 91% of mothers polled agreed with the statement,

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[405] Heather Hendershot, <u>Saturday Morning Censors</u>, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pg 29

"television is a great educational influence."[406] By the early '60s, however, these attitudes had begun to change dramatically. Two primary strains of criticism directed at children's television emerged in the first years of the decade; that television programing directed at the young was exploitative, valueless dreck that often reveled in excessive violence and that it bombarded its defenseless audience with advertisements. By the middle years of the '60s, a sense of social breakdown had caused arguments regarding the proliferating violence on television to surpass the vociferousness of previously dominant complaints about the medium's rampant commercialism. The cartoons filling Saturday morning bore the brunt of an inordinate amount of these criticisms. *The Los Angeles Times*, reminiscing about a time when kid's programming was educational ("Remember Mr. I. Magination? And Watch the World? And Let's Take a Trip?") laments that "Things have changed. This coming season, the children will get their 'sense of the world at large' mostly from cartoons on weekends." *The New York Times*' George Gent concurred in this despairing view of children's TV, explaining that, while almost every television program broadcast by the networks was devoid of redeeming value, "the very popular cartoon shows are considered by many to be the most offensive in taste and in inculcating undesirable social attitudes in the young."[407]

Criticism directed at CBS's slate of superhero cartoons was particularly vitriolic. One reviewer declared that the programs, "are loaded with dark violence. A segment of "Superman" featured a couple of giant green lizards, pursuing a handsome fellow in prehistoric garb (such mixes are SOP here) that would spook adult viewers let alone the scapes [sic]."[408] *TV Guide* labelled Silverman's bailiwick "TV's Saturday Morning Ghetto," a nasty place defined by "the Weirdo Superhero."[409] The loaded term

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[406] Robert W. Morrow, Sesame Street and the Reform of Children's Television, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pg 16

[407] George Gent, "Networks Vary Diets For Children, TV's Overfed, Undernourished," *New York Times*, 7 Jan. 1967, pg. 39

[408] Bill Greeley, "Saturday Morning Viewing, A 'Shattering' Experience," *Variety* Vol. 245 Iss. 7, 4 Jan. 1967, pg. 82

[409] Robert Higgins, *TV Guide*, 22 March 1968

"weirdo" was not unique to *TV Guide*, with publications like *Variety* using the same wording to describe superhero cartoons.[410] Such terminology gestured towards something indefinably transgressive about the tights-clad crimefighters. As Fredric Wertham had explained at great length, superheroes seemed to hint dangerously at non-heteronormative sexualities, a suspicion that the prime-time Batman program was doing nothing to alleviate.

As a program aimed at both children and adults, the primetime *Batman* also came in for its share of criticism. *The New York Times* carried a piece by Eda J. LeShan, a consultant at a nursery school, who asked, "if camp involves a wry sophistication, an adult grasp of subtleties in language and point of view, does it matter that children watching this program take it absolutely literally?" The answer, of course, is that it does, a point LeShan proceeds to illustrate by relaying anecdotes in which her charges were not suitably upset by a car accident or engaged in a fight. "There was a new kind of wildness in the children's play," a fact LeShan attributed to the "overstimulating" *Batman*.[411]

Dr. Benjamin Spock, the era's premiere popular expert in childhood development, initially approved of *Batman*, but changed his opinion in response to reports like LeShan's. Without having watched the program, Spock declared, "Batman is bad for pre-school children. It encourages free expression for violence." Spock even went so far as to declare television programs like *Batman* worse than comics. Like many of the experts railing against children's TV, Spock attributed many of the woes of late '60s America to the malign influence of the tube: "We are a country of people who indulge themselves in free expressions of aggressiveness… We delite [sic] in westerns, crime and brutality. Our treatment of Indians, Negroes and immigrants is unbelievable. We seem to glory in aggressiveness if we make believe or if we think the other guy is a bad guy. I make an earnest plea that we stop."[412] In reply

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[410] "The Saturday Morning Blues," *Variety* Vol. 251 Iss. 5, 19 June 1968, pg. 43

[411] Eda J. LeShan, "At War With Batman," *New York Times*, 15 May 1966, pg. sm57

[412] Dean Gysel, "Batman Foe? The Dread Dr. Spock!" *Los Angeles Times*, 11 July 1966, pg. c19

to Spock's article, an annoyed Dozier wrote the child care expert. The producer voiced his anger at

Spock for having reviewed the program without ever having seen an episode: "Would you like to have

one of your books reviewed by a reviewer who had never read it?"[413] Spock's reply to Dozier lacked a

certain clinical rigor: "All I said in the interview was that a number of parents and professional people

have told me that preschool children react to Batman by becoming physically abusive with each other.

I've heard it often enough so that I'm sure it's true. I don't see why it would make any difference

whether I look at the program." The pediatrician once more accused programs like *Batman* of being at

the root of growing social upheaval, writing, "I see many evidences that our country is sliding more and

more into a casual acceptance of violence and I'll do everything in my power to call attention to it."[414]

Interest groups began to focus their ire on the proliferation of tights-clad adventurers filling up

the airwaves. Action for Children's Television (ACT), perhaps the most visible and influential pressure

group concerned with television, formed in 1968 to deal with issues of commercialism in local Boston

kid's TV. The group quickly turned its attention to animated superheroes, however, loudly voicing their

disdain for the changes Silverman had wrought. The PTA likewise issued frequent resolutions

condemning the state of children's television, and Mrs. Irvin Hendryson, national president of the PTA,

shuddered, "Television cartoons are worse than immoral…. They are full of horror and violence and

negative values."[415] Even the National Association for Better Broadcasting (NABB), a major television

trade organization responsible for the code of good conduct that governed much of the networks' self-

regulation, had harsh words for Silverman's heroes. In the 1968 Program Evaluations issue of their

organization' magazine, NABB opined, "Television for children, 1968 style, is a mass of indiscriminate

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[413] William Dozier to Benjamin Spock, 12 July 1966, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[414] Benjamin Spock to William Dozier, 5 Oct. 1966, Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[415] Windeler 53

entertainment dominated by some 40 animated program series, which are in turn dominated by ugliness, noise and violence."[416]

Increasing pressure from interest groups drove renewed government scrutiny. One of the initial impetuses behind the rise of anxieties about television violence was the juvenile delinquency panic of the mid-50s, the same moment of cultural fear that gave rise to Senator Estes Kefauver's United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency and provided a space for Dr. Fredric Wertham's devastating attack on the comic industry. After Kefauver resigned the leadership of the Subcommittee, the role passed to Senator Thomas Dodd, who turned the committee's attention towards the issue of televised violence. [417] In the mid-60s, the Subcommittee once again played a key role in focusing public concerns on costumed superheroes, this time concentrating on the versions of the characters found in children's television rather than in comics.

In the wake of RFK's death, the attacks on violent children's television intensified. An increasing number of critics, watching the chaos that seemed to be unfolding everywhere in America, drew a very direct line between TV's influence and the disintegration of the nation. Father John M. Culkin, S.J., a scholar who had been instrumental in convincing Marshall McLuhan to come to New York, told the *New York Times*, "The generation in college today came home from the hospital to find a tube in their living room. After 18 years of it, now there's upheaval on 62 American college campuses. Coincidence? Accident?"[418] The Democratic National Convention's Platform Committee, rather than call for an end to the war in Vietnam, drafted a plank condemning TV violence – but events in Chicago quickly persuaded the party that it was best not to draw attention to televised mayhem, and the plank was

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[416] Lawrence Laurent, "Changes For Saturday TV, *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, 22 March 1968 pg. c7

[417] Morrow 22

[418] John Leonard, "Since the Kiddies Are Hooked – Why Not Use TV For a Head Start Program?," *New York Times,* 14 July 1968, pg. sm5

omitted from the formal platform. President Johnson advised the U.S. National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, formed following Robert Kennedy's assassination, to pay particular attention to, "the forms of communication that reach the family and our young."[419]

The Commission on the Cause and Prevention of Violence, headed by Professor Milton Eisenhower and commonly known as the Eisenhower Committee, served as a particularly potent outlet for complaints about the state of television. The Eisenhower Commission was the spiritual successor to United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, which had collapsed after its chairman Thomas Dodd was revealed to have taken bribes from the television industry.[420] In December of 1968, the Commission held hearings concerning the impact of televised violence. FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson proclaimed that the networks should be sued for the "psychic harm" done to "millions of children" by Saturday morning television. Representatives from a range of news outlets leveled a condemnatory figure at television. Testimony before the commission frequently made it clear that television was being scapegoated for governmental violence. Several witnesses accused television of dramatically over-emphasizing the war in Vietnam, and a pair of Chicago lawyers blamed the turmoil at the Chicago DNC on television cameras which offered protestors the opportunity to broadcast their activities around the world. Nicholas Johnson issued a sweeping indictment against TV, whose "influence has affected, in one way or another, virtually every phenomenon in our present-day society." Television was at the root of all of the nation's ills: "One cannot understand violence in America without understanding the impact of television programming upon that violence." The commissioners were overwhelmingly sympathetic to Johnson's view of the world.[421]

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[419] Sam Blum, "De-Escalating the Violence on TV," *New York Times*, 8 Dec. 1968, pg 401

[420] Morrow, pg 22

[421] "Violent Talk at Violence Hearings," *Broadcasting* Vol. 75 Iss. 26, 23 Dec. 1968

In 1969, the Commission issued a report declaring that violence on TV contributes to violence in America. If television could influence viewers to buy the goods and services it advertised, the report reasoned, it could just as easily influence them to violence. TV, the report announced, was at least partially responsible for the madness engulfing American society: "We do not suggest that television is a principal cause of violence in society. We do suggest that it is a contributing factor."[422] The commissioners called upon broadcasters to reduce violence in the programs it aired, urging particular restraint in regard to cartoons: "The cartoons broadcast by the networks on Saturday morning during the 1967-68 and 1968-69 seasons were the most intensively violent programs on television, with perhaps the least amount of redeeming constructive value."[423] Superheroes were targeted, if only indirectly, as the report called for the elimination of cartoons with "serious, non-comic violence" and the reduction of "action-adventure programs," animated or otherwise. In fact, the report had originally pilloried television even more harshly before the commissioners toned down the original draft's vitriolic tone.[424] The networks' public trials were not over, however; in April 1969, driven in large part by a widespread perception that the final report of the Eisenhower Commission had been weak and vacillating, the incoming Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare created the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior. This new project was modeled on the 1964 Surgeon General's report that had linked smoking to lung cancer, a reflection of the seriousness with which the worries about TV were being taken. The final report, issued in late 1971, caused the surgeon general to suggest that the government monitor television violence and that the network implement a "family viewing hour" in the evening that was safe for consumption by all ages.[425] This latter idea would not be implemented by the

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[422] "Violence Report: TV Guilty," *Variety* Vol. 256 Iss. 7, 1 Oct. 1969, pg. 36

[423] "Violence Report Draws Dissents," *Broadcasting* Vol. 77 Iss. 13, 29 Sept. 1969

[424] "Violence Report: TV Guilty" 36

[425] Morrow

networks until 1975, and would play a key role in the development of the next wave of superhero television.

The threat of outside regulation of television was palpable. Everyone involved with the conception, production, and airing of superhero cartoons became eager to pass the buck and escape the ire of the public – and the looming possibility of outside regulation. Norman Prescott, head of Filmation, the studio that had made its name by producing *Superman* for Fred Silverman, was all too happy to condemn superhero cartoons: "The parents had every right to holler: I'm with them all the way."[426] Elsewhere, Prescott was quick to point to the real culprits: "we had to offer the networks what they were seeking." Hanna-Barbera's Joe Barbera eagerly showed reporters storyboards of several gentle programs his studio had pitched to the networks before revealing, "They didn't think it would get ratings…. It was too innocent. They wanted something on the rougher side."[427] Fritz Freleng, the legendary Warner Bros. animator now ensconced as head of the DePatie-Freleng animation studio, concurred with Prescott and Barbera's condemnation of superhero violence: "I don't like to make that kind of thing; animation has better applications."[428]

Fred Silverman, never slow to sense a shift in the pop culture winds, redesigned CBS's Saturday morning line-up and unveiled the new programs to the *New York Times*. "We're moving away from adventure." The Times interrupts to helpfully notes that, "Adventure is a TV euphemism for violence." Silverman continued, "Our fall schedule will be revolutionary. New forms. A 2 ½-hour comedy bloc on Saturday mornings. Road Runner. Bugs Bunny. We've bought reruns of 'The Monkees,' and we'll slot them in there, too. Maybe a circus thing. The sponsors are all for it."[429] NBC and ABC were following

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[426] Windeler 53

[427] "The Saturday Morning Blues" 43

[428] Windeler 53

[429] Leonard sm5

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the same path, eager, in the words of the *Times*, to, "substitute less violent half-hours for the "zap-pow" superheroes."[430] ABC and NBC joined CBS in jettisoning their superhero programs, and all three networks happily told the media that the 1969-1970 Saturday morning lineup would be full of comedy, not adventure. The sudden shift was a costly one for the networks: in general, cartoons only began to show profits after six runs over two years. The string of sudden cancellations necessitated by the anti-violence turn left shows short of their contracted run and the networks deep in the red. NBC was particularly hard hit, and had to stock its Saturday morning with cheap reruns.[431] Silverman, meanwhile, happily trotted out a full new slate not totally bereft of comic books adaptations – a key element of the new CBS lineup would be Filmation's adaptation of Archie. Silverman benefitted just as handsomely from dropping animated superheroes as he had from introducing them to television in the first place, and CBS's new comedy-heavy line-up widened the network's already formidable lead over its Saturday morning rivals.[432]

Marvel's brief bout of success in bringing its characters to television was quickly stymied by the industry-wide turn against violence. Edwin Vane, ABC's Vice President for daytime programming, announced to concerned parents that, "as a result of the protest we have re-examined two of our adventure shows which will be on again this fall, and made a very strong effort to stay away from anything that could be construed as violent." The two programs to which he referred were both based on Marvel properties, Hanna-Barbera's *Fantastic Four* and Grantray-Lawrence's *Spider-Man*. The network banned two episodes from both series, declaring them excessively violent.[433] Variety joined with ABC executives in singling out Marvel's programs for scorn, sneering, "Marvel product is best summed up by

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[430] Windeler 53

[431] "NBC's New De-Violenced Sat. Kidvid Sked Skirts Old Cartoon Economics With Reruns & Off-Web," *Variety* Vol. 254 Iss. 3, 5 March 1969, pg. 36

[432] "Kidvid Cartoons a Romp For CBS," Variety Vol. 252 Iss. 9, 16 Oct. 1968, pg. 35

[433] Windeler 53

this character description from an ABC press release: 'The Thing, one of the strongest and ugliest creatures on earth.'"[434] In a little over a year, both series would cease airing new episodes, and by the end of 1970 they were off the air entirely. Marvel would not return to television in animated form until 1978.

<u>Sunny Day, Chasing the Clouds Away</u>

No program was as indicative of the late '60s turn against violence and commercialism in children's television as *Sesame Street* (1969-present), held up by proponents as a model for a new kind of kids' TV. The project began its long gestation in 1966, and "an $8 million experimental workshop to develop educational programs for pre-schoolers," the Children's Television Workshop, was founded on March 20, 1968.[435] The project was viewed by its creators as an experiment in educating young children, conceived in relation to the new Head Start program and a widespread focus on pre-school education. The media, on the other hand, immediately understood the project in relation to current efforts to reform children's television. Contrasting *Sesame Street* to the universe of superheroes, PTA Magazine lauded the program for presenting, "a child's world without violence, without fear."[436] The networks reacted to it as another volley in the assault on violent cartoons and toy commercials, more motivation to shift from superhero to humor cartoons and to begin to develop more educationally substantive television.

Sesame Street was designed to compete with contemporary, commercial children's programs like the ones beloved by Fred Silverman. *Sesame* producer Joan Cooney stated as much to the Christian

[434] "Weigh Sat. Kidvid violence," *Variety* Vol. 251 Iss. 10, 24 Jul. 1968, pg. 29

[435] George Gent, "Major Changes Due in Children's Shows," *Austin Statesman*, 24 March 1968, pg. t7

[436] Morrow 101

Science Monitor, positing, "If 'Batman' did it – reached all the kids – why can't we?"[437] Early *Sesame Street* was thus full of quick, advertisement-like segments, high production values – and superheroes. As part of its guiding model of partnership between education professionals and television veterans, *Sesame Street*'s producers contracted outside studios to provide the short animated and filmed segments that punctuated the adventures of the denizens of the Street. Among the outside animation studios involved, Filmation, the studio that worked with Silverman in inaugurating the Saturday morning superhero moment, provided educational shorts featuring Batman and Superman. In fact, the animated Batman played a pivotal role in the pilot episode for the planned series. In their second appearance in the series' first episode, Bert and Ernie are bickering over whether to watch *Batman* or another program – until the animated hero speaks to them from the television, urging them to share. The superhero's appearance on *Sesame Street* marked a transitional moment, a shift from the era of cartoon crusaders to one in which networks were – at least ostensibly – concerned with the impact of television violence.[438]

A few years later, Marvel's stars also found a role as partners of the Children's Television Workshop. In segments peppered throughout *The Electric Company* (1971-1977), a mute, live-action Spider-Man bumbled his way through confrontations with an ice-cream-craving Yeti and other non-threatening baddies. In conjunction with the program, Marvel launched *Spidey Super Stories*, a 35-cent monthly ad-free comic featuring stories aimed at 6- to 10-year-olds. A 1979 Marvel press release, making a particular effort to draw readers' attention to the fact that, far from being a threat to the nation's youth, superheroes could play a positive role in children's lives, noted, "Marvel's SUPER HEROES are often called upon to assist teachers and librarians in their educational efforts."[439]

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[437] Morrow 65

[438] Morrow

[439] Press Release, "Marvel Comics Group Continues to Captivate Kids; Publisher Emerges as Comprehensive Communications Company," undated, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Lee, always adept at adjusting to shifts in popular taste, tried to respond to the turn towards educational, non-violent programming by proposing a gentle talking-animal cartoon known as *Calvin's Classmates* to the networks, which were momentarily eager to show a willingness to follow in *Sesame Street*'s footsteps. In his pitch, Lee joined in the widespread condemnation of the state of children's television, declaring "In TV, as elsewhere, the average kiddie show is invariably one-dimensional. Its raison d'etre is either violent slapstick or violent adventure." The program would feature the misadventures of a young cat, the "Charlie Brown" type Calvin, and his classroom full of friends. Lee sought to improve children's television using the same techniques he had employed as part of the Marvel Revolution, creating stories which, though fantastic, maintained a firm basis in reality: "Unfortunately, weekly themes [in children's TV] almost never relate to the real world—the world in which the viewer lives. Thus, today's juvenile shows are victims of a serious 'empathy gap.' Or, so they were, until now." Employing an approach he would return to again and again as he attempted to sell pitches to outside media, Lee suggested that the show be socially relevant while remaining politically non-threatening. Jasper J. Crockett, the children's anthropomorphized owl principal, was posited as the program's stand in for "the Establishment," constantly flustered by Calvin and his buddies as they provided a positive example for young viewers by emulating the Peace Corp, exploring the generation gap, learning about Pop art, and having other responsible misadventures. Lee explicitly positioned the program as a response to the national mood, explaining in his presentation to the networks that, "the elimination of violence, in and of itself, is a most desirable goal."[440] The cartoon failed to attract network interest.

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[440] Stan Lee, "Calvin's Classroom proposal," Stan Lee archives, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

<u>The Split</u>

In the late 1960s, Batman did double duty on television, appearing not only in guest spots on *Sesame Street* but in his own weekend cartoon as well. As the caped crusader moved from ABC primetime to animated form on CBS on Saturday mornings, he lost the camp sensibility that had been a trademark of his primetime outings. The new program was aimed solely at children and the producers had no illusion that it would find an older audience – the safely distanced viewing position offered by camp was now entirely superfluous. In another nod towards his childish audience, Batman now eschewed violence, bringing him into line with much of the rest of kid's TV.[441]

The comic book version of the character quickly shed the vestiges of camp as well, but on the page the Dark Knight took on a very different tone than his cartoon counterpart. While the animated Batman was steadfast and stodgy and safe, very much a hero out of the classic matinee serial tradition, the comic book version assumed a grimmer cowl. The comic's creators had loathed the camp approach of the Dozier-produced television series. They were fully aware of the insult to their work implicit in the idea that adults could only enjoy it at a mutually-agreed upon ironic distance. Led by editor Julie Schwartz, writer Dennis O'Neil, and artist Neal Adams, in 1970's DC debuted a darker version of the hero designed to appeal openly and directly to an older audience. This version of the character, who debuted in *Detective Comics* #395's "The Secret of the Waiting Graves," was a "grim avenger of the night"[442] concerned with street-level crime rather than sci-fi silliness. To further the overall mood of gritty realism, Robin was packed off to college and out of the book and the Batmobile and other bat-toys were

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[441] "The Saturday Morning Blues" 43

[442] Bradford W. Wright, <u>Comic Book Nation</u>, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) pg 233

downplayed. A few years later, the Joker returned, now a giggling murderer rather than the playful crook assayed by Ceasar Romero on ABC.

The difference between the comic Batman and the Batman featured in other media was stark. The Caped Crusader's split personality was emblematic of a larger phenomenon which would complicate superhero adaptations for the next twenty years. Beginning in the mid-60s, comic creators began to have a very different perception of their audience then did their inter-industrial media partners. This split manifested in the material each set of creators released, creating an increasingly sharp contrast between the tone of comic book superheroes and their manifestations in other media. In 1974 the *New York Times* noted the split, comparing the character found in the *Electric-Company*-offshoot *Spidey Super Stories*, who could be found non-violently matching wits with an ambulatory brick wall, with the gritty canonical Spider-Man, locked in combat with the murderous vigilante The Punisher, a disillusioned Vietnam veteran whose wife and children had been gunned down in front of him.[443]

On the page, the tone of DC and Marvel's superhero comics aged with their audience. This audience grew older and older, largely because of the more mature stories and deeper continuity Lee and his collaborators had instituted and the paratextual steps Lee had taken to cultivate reader loyalty. By the '70s, creators understood that many fans continued reading comics well into adulthood, a sharp contrast to the assumptions of comic creators in the '40s and '50s. This process accelerated in the late '70s with the emergence of the direct market. Where comics had once graced the shelves of corner stores and newsstands, they were now confined to specialty comic stores to which children had far less access. Publishers who aimed their product specifically at child readers such as Harvey and Dell lost market share and reduced the number of books they published monthly or shuttered their comic operations completely. By the '80s, complex and critically-acclaimed works by comic writers like Frank Miller and Alan Moore

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[443] Richard Flaste, "Spider-Man to the Rescue," <u>New York Times</u>, 11 Nov. 1974, pg. 25

did not make even a pretext of appealing to children. At the same time that the fandom aged, however, it also shrank. Comics became a niche medium requiring a significant investment of time and effort to follow the complex storylines. For most pop culture consumers, the changes in the characters on the comic page passed unnoticed. Batman, Superman, and other comic heroes remained frozen in the '50s or early '60s, brightly-colored kid stuff.

The increasingly divided audience posed a particular challenge for creators like Stan Lee who sought to straddle the gap between comics and other media. In interviews, Lee acknowledged the bifurcating comic audience but turned long-standing complaints about violence in comic books and kids' television on their ear, blaming children for the violent content of comic books: "If somebody punches somebody in a story, we throw it in because the kids wouldn't buy the book unless we did. Frankly, it's our concession to the younger readers. There has to be a fight scene somewhere." [444]

Fans became increasingly disgruntled with the childish nature of comic book adaptations and with how such works reflected back on older comic readers. A 1972 letter from Bruce Cardozo regarding the Grantray-Lawrence *Spider-Man* series articulates such concerns: "I was also very disappointed in the Spider-Man cartoons…. They were geared to a very young audience – This is contradictory to Marvel because you write for an older audience and by doing this you have captured a young and old audience."[445]

In 1981, Lee took to his familiar soapbox to attempt to address concerns such as Cardozo's regarding the childish tone of most superhero adaptations. The occasion of Lee's address was the debut of the animated series *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* (1981-1983) on NBC. "I wanna give you the real inside story, to explain why tv cartoons which are based on comic book characters are so often

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[444] Bourne

[445] Cardozo would go on to work in a technical capacity on Star Wars V and VI, Superman IV, Thor, Captain America, The Avengers, and a host of other films. (Bruce Cardozo to Stan Lee, 10/16/1972, Stan Lee Collection)

different than the same characters might be in their original comic books. I don't want you to think that we decided to make the various changes you'll see on tv just for the fun of it." To explain away the unpopular choices the program's producers had made, he offered a very different depiction of collaborative authorship than that which had once defined his Bullpen Bulletins. Because *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* was animated by the in-house Marvel Productions, Lee laid all the blame on the network which had purchased the program: "Remember me telling you that when we publish a comic book we do it our way? Well, when you produce a show for network television, you do it the network's way! And our loveable li'l network had its own ideas about how the new Spidey show should be done."[446]

Lee placed the blame for many of the changes on the Saturday morning audience, explaining that the villains used ray blasters and force beams because,

> they're not allowed to shoot guns on kidvid thrillers, that's why! Nor are our cavortin' characters permitted to use knives, clubs, bows and arrows, spears, or indeed any weapons at all which their young viewers might easily obtain and attempt to emulate. And the ruling does make sense. You've gotta remember how many children who've just barely learned to talk stay glued to the tv screens on Saturday mornings. The only thing is, you'd better make sure to develop a taste for ray guns!

Lee closed with a plea to his aging audience to support the childish adaptation: "I'm also hoping you'll say 'Hey, it may be a Saturday morning kidvid creation, but it's the best one I've seen yet!'…. Sure, 'Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends' will be a Saturday morning tv show for younger viewers, but take it from us—we're gonna make sure it'll be the best show of its type on tv!" [447]

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[446] "Stan's Soapbox," 1981, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[447] "Stan's Soapbox," 1981

When Lee and his inter-media partners attempted to create projects that could appeal to both of the perceived superhero audiences, the result was often unwieldy. A 1976 outline for a proposed Spider-Man film neatly illustrates the difficulties of attempting to simultaneously placate the aging comic audience and child viewers. In the wake of the cartoon *Spider-Man*'s cancellation, Lee joined with Steve Krantz, the producer of that program, to pitch a feature based on Marvel's most popular characters to Warner Bros. and, should they prove uninterested, the other major studios. The pair secured the services of Sterling Silliphant, whose resume seemed ideally suited for the project. Silliphant brought both the prestige of his Oscar win for *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) as well as experience in the nascent field of blockbuster filmmaking, having written *The Towering Inferno* (1974) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972). Despite his impressive credentials, the outline that Silliphant produced in collaboration with Krantz is an odd document reflecting a deep uncertainty about the intended audience for the material.

Silliphant and Krantz's 1976 proposal mixes elements clearly aimed at children – the villain's master plan is to convert the Statue of Liberty into a giant robot that will hold New York hostage – with plot details taken from mid-70s *Spider-Man* stories intended to appeal to an older audience. Chief among these is the inclusion of Spider-Man's girlfriend Gwen Stacy and the depiction of her death. Stacy's passing would have ensured that the proposed film would have ended on a jarringly downbeat note:

> SPIDER-MAN is desolate. The one special person who was watching the conflict with police Captain Stacey, was his daughter, Gwen. In the struggle with the ROBOT there was an electrical explosion that destroyed a small harbor boat and its occupants. In that boat was Gwen, and she died while SPIDER-MAN conquered. He blames himself.[448]

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[448] Steve Krantz and Sterling Silliphant, Spider-Man treatment, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

The sequence is a reference to one of the most significant Spider-Man stories ever written. Stacy was Peter Parker's first long-term girlfriend, debuting in 1965 as one of the new students Peter meets upon entering university. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* 121, cover dated June 1973, Stacy is abducted by Spider-Man's arch-nemesis the Green Goblin and hurled from the top of the George Washington Bridge.[449] In one of the most famous panels in comic history, Spider-Man successfully webs Stacy before she hits the water, but the sudden halt in her descent snaps her neck. The moment sent shock waves through the comic audience. Characters had died in comics before – in fact, Stacy's own police captain father had met his demise in a 1970 issue of the same book. Most previous deaths were of minor characters, and none had the lengthy history or narrative significance of Stacy. Depictions of Parker's grief would continue for years. The intense continuity which Lee and his Marvel co-creators had helped introduce into superhero comics made the death – a rare moment of definitive narrative closure – particularly meaningful. Popular comic historians identify Gwen Stacy's death as a transitional moment in comic publishing, a shift from what they refer to as the "silver age" to the "bronze age," an era marked by a growing focus on older readers.

By far the strangest element of the film proposal is the choice of villain. Rather than choose one of Spider-Man's traditional villains such as Doctor Octopus or the Rhino, the treatment confronts Spider-Man with Dr. Mengele, the "Angel of Death," and his squad of elite S.S. troops. The Nazi, encamped in the Brazilian jungle, intends to use the weaponized Statue of Liberty to rebuild the Third Reich.[450] Overall, the proposal reflects a deep confusion over who, precisely, made up the audience for cross-media comic-book adaptations – children or adults. This deep uncertainty regarding the nature of the comic audience would only grow worse over the next decade.

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[449] The story's text identifies the site of the conflict as the George Washington Bridge, but the artwork depicts it as the Brooklyn Bridge.

[450] Krantz and Silliphant

Conglomeration

The Pop art moment saw major changes in the economic structure of the comic industry, as corporate conglomerates became interested in acquiring comic book publishers. In 1968, Martin Goodman sold his business to photo processing company Perfect Film and Chemical Corporation. Perfect, later known as Cadence Industries, had recently become interested in acquiring publishing properties, having purchased the holdings of Popular Library in December 1967. Marvel's purchase was part of a wave of mergers and acquisitions in the publishing industry during the '60s. 1967 alone saw more than three dozen publishers find new owners or partners.[451] That same wave had seen DC acquired by Kinney International the year before. DC's owners, realizing that the brief flurry of mainstream interest in comics was rapidly abating and hoping to cash in on Batman's fleeting television-driven popularity, struck while the iron was hot and sold the firm to the Steve Ross-headed parking company. For the first time, both Marvel and DC were part of corporate conglomerates. The development would prove more advantageous for DC; in 1969, Ross purchased the failing Warner Bros. Studio, and the comic company became part of a media empire capable of adapting DC's characters to film and television. It would take many years and several false starts before Marvel was joined to a media company similarly well positioned to leverage their stock of IPs.

Marvel's new owners made it a point to keep Lee, who they understood to be the single authorial genius at the company. The editor received a three-year contract and a promised raise, though their generosity did not extend beyond that – as Lee later explained, he got "No bonus. No bonds. No [stock

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[451] Phillip G. Altbach and Edith S. Hoshion, International Book Publishing: An Encyclopedia, (New York, Garland Publishing, 1995)

options], either worthless or otherwise. Zilch"[452] Still, by 1968 he had established his authorial bonafides sufficiently in the eyes of his new non-comic-fan superiors to ensure his continued employment. Jack Kirby was not as lucky – his friend and biographer Mark Evanier relates how little Cadence's executives understood the collaborative nature of comic creation: "Kirby's lawyer contacted the new owners to tell them that Marvel had two creative geniuses. The response was along the lines of, 'Don't be silly. Stan created everything and the artists just drew what he told them to draw.' [Kirby's wife] Roz recalled the attorney saying he'd even spoken to one high exec at Perfect Film who thought Stan drew all the comics, too."[453]

Jack Kirby quit Marvel in March 1970, officially severing one of the most productive creative partnerships in comic history. The degree to which Lee assumed the role of authorial genius in dealing with people outside the comic industry, such as the producers of The Marvel Super Heroes and the media, had begun to weigh heavily on Kirby. Compounding Kirby's frustration, he and Lee had come to loggerheads over the creative direction of several characters, and Lee's editorial role guaranteed that Kirby's arguments inevitably proved fruitless. Kirby was unable even to control the destiny of the artwork he created – any drawings produced for Marvel became the property of the publisher, and as Marvel's popularity increased Goodman was able to use these images in more and more ways. Mark Evanier explained, "Jack's plots and designs were on TV shows, his art was on toys… and he wasn't seeing a nickel from any of it; just the occasional rate increase of a dollar or two per page."[454] The final straw came when Marvel proffered Kirby a new contract stipulating that he renounce all claims to the art he had produced during his time with the publisher. Kirby promptly left Marvel and fled to the waiting arms of DC, which had been courting him for some time.

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[452] American Comic Book Chronicles: 1965-69 195

[453] Mark Evanier, Kirby: King of Comics (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2017) pg. 150

[454] Evanier 150

Kirby would grow more and more vocal about his resentment of Lee over the coming years. The artist became increasingly strident in his claims of authorship, downplaying the importance of collaboration and inflating his role in the creative process. He told an interviewer in 1970, "[Fantastic Four] was my idea. It was my idea to do it the way it was; my idea to develop it the way it is." Still, he was willing to add the caveat, "I'm not saying that Stan had nothing to do with it. Of course he did. We talked things out."[455] As time passed, authorial conflicts festered, a fan community eager to listen grew, and Lee's media presence became more insistent, Kirby would offer such acknowledgements far less often.

In 1970, a moment of opportunity for comic book adaptations had closed. Over the previous several years television producers had reinforced the widely held understanding that superheroes were suitable only for the youngest viewers at the same time that the widespread condemnation of televised violence had declared those same characters completely inappropriate for children. Marvel's brief spate of success in adapting their characters to animation ended abruptly, and the heroes Lee had helped create were once more confined solely to the comic page. They would stay there until the late '70s, when another TV program based on a DC hero ignited television producers' interest in comic book heroes once more.

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[455] Bruce Hamilton, "A Talk with Artist-Writer-Editor Jack Kirby," <u>Collected Jack Kirby Collector</u> Vol. 2, (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2004) pg 188

Chapter 4

<u>The Wonder Woman Moment</u>

In the '70s, the comic industry was mired in one of its periodic moments of crisis. Superheroes were out of fashion, and comic creators and executives cast about in a futile attempt to find the next big thing. Comic books seemed to be a doomed medium once more and artists and writers desperately sought more stable and financially rewarding work. Stan Lee's own attempts to flee the sinking industry by bringing Marvel to film or television were proving fruitless, as the major culture industries demonstrated little interest in comic properties that were rapidly losing their audience. In the middle of the decade, hope would appear from a most unexpected source – the women's movement and the comic book icon a prominent segment of it had adopted, Wonder Woman. In the late '70s, the Amazing Amazon and the liberal feminist movement which celebrated her would have a profound effect on the shape of the comic industry and its interactions with film and television producers.

Wonder Woman was uniquely positioned to appeal to the rising feminist movement. She was created by a writer whose ideology, professional background, and cultural standing set him outside of comics' industrialized creative process. Largely free from the editorial oversight that existed at the major comic companies, Wonder Woman co-creator William Moulton Marston was able to imbue the Amazon hero with strong undertones of a radically feminist ideology. This fundamental aspect of the character made it extremely difficult for the comic industry and, later, the television industry to integrate Wonder Woman into a standardized creative process that discouraged radical politics. In the '70s, Gloria Steinem realized the distinctive possibilities offered by Wonder Woman and reshaped her to better fit the needs of the modern women's movement. It was this figure, originated by Marston and reshaped by Steinem, who inspired the *Wonder Woman* television program.

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As during the pop moment of the previous decade, a hit television series based on a DC character had a profound effect on the comic industry and its cross-media efforts. The program ignited the TV industry's interest in comic book superheroes and provided Marvel with an opportunity to bring several of their characters to television. Ultimately, the television industry's late-70s interest in comic book superheroes inspired Marvel's most dramatic cross-media effort yet: the publisher acquired the DePatie-Freleng animation studios and, for the first time, had the industrial apparatus necessary to control how their characters were brought to television.

Wonder Woman's success also had a dramatic impact on the shape of the comic industry's output, inspiring DC and Marvel to attempt to create a new generation of female heroes. These efforts highlighted one of the primary characteristics of the industrial process that created superhero comics: it was overwhelmingly staffed by men, whose limited experiences and perspectives often made it difficult for them to create powerful female characters. This was true of many of America's major culture industries, of course, but it was particularly pronounced in the realm of comic books. The classic Hollywood studio system had included a number of women along its production line, particularly expert script writers like Anita Loos and a range of popular actresses, many of whom, like Bette Davis, exerted considerable control over the type of pictures they appeared in and the shape of the creative unit that produced them. Women in the comic industry were far rarer, though not unknown. In their absence, creators like Stan Lee, Gerry Conway, and Roy Thomas struggled to create and depict powerful female heroines and adapt to an industrial and cultural moment defined by the woman's movement and its superhero of choice, Wonder Woman.

Wonder Woman emerged as a beacon of hope for a comic industry that was undergoing

convulsive, chaotic change. Marvel fans perusing comics dated September 1972 were in for a shock. In

that issue, Stan Lee used his Soapbox to make a major announcement – he was stepping down as

Marvel's editor and art director and taking up the mantle of publisher. It was an appropriate moment for a

changing of the guard – comic sales were falling across the board in the comic industry and it seemed like

the field might once again be heading for a final crisis. Lee framed his new mission in life in explicitly

cross-media terms, explaining his labors would now be dedicated, "exclusively to dreaming up new,

exciting projects for the Bullpen… and new fields for Marvel to conquer in film, TV, books, and you-

name-it we'll-do-it!"[456] Responsibility for answering letters and updating the Bullpen Bulletins would

fall to Marvel's new Editor-in-Chief, Roy Thomas. Lee would keep writing his Soapbox regularly until

1980, shortly before he moved to California on a permanent basis. His days of writing comic books were

largely over, though he would go on writing the newspaper Spider-Man strip for several decades. Lee

would not prove adept at the administrative and financial responsibilities his new role as publisher

entailed, and by the mid-70s he had happily ceded these tasks to others. Instead, he spent the next several

decades churning out a copious array of television and film proposals, outlines, and series bibles, very

few of which would proceed far beyond his typewriter. For the rest of his life, Lee would concentrate all

of his attention on two related tasks: raising the cultural status of comic books and creating a space for

Marvel in Hollywood.

Lee was not the only creator who turned to Hollywood as the comic industry seemed to wobble

on its last legs in the early to mid-70s. After an Ill-fated return to Marvel in 1976, Kirby concentrated his

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[456] Roy Thomas, "The Way it Began!" *Fantastic Four* No. 126, Marvel Comics 1972

efforts full time on Hollywood, providing storyboards for the new DePatie-Freleng produced *Fantastic Four*. He would also storyboard live-action films, including the fake sci-fi film *Argo*, used as a CIA front to rescue six diplomats from Iran in 1980. Among the cartoons Kirby worked on while in California was *Thundarr the Barbarian* (1980-1981), created by another Marvel refugee, Steve Gerber. In the '80s, Gerry Conway, who had joined Marvel as a teenager in the early '60s, became a successful TV writer and producer, working on programs including *Matlock* (1986-1995), *Diagnosis: Murder* (1993-2001), and *Law & Order* (1990-2010). Mort Weisinger, DC's Superman editor for several decades, left the company in 1971. His son explained that he hoped to, "[go] on to other things, like novels, perhaps try a screenplay."[457]

The urge to achieve cultural respectability via a jump to other media clearly remained widespread among comic creators in the mid-70s. Roy Thomas, one of the first of a new wave of comic book fans-turned-creators, gestured towards this fact in a letter to Lee: "Unlike most comic-book writers I know, I have little interest in doing TV or movies except for money."[458] Still, the tenuous comic book marketplace drove even comic fans like Thomas to seek other work, and as he wrote the above words in 1976 he was working on a film and a TV series pilot.[459] As the career shifts made by these writers illustrates, in the early '70s comics were still considered at best a stepping stone to a more mainstream entertainment career. A roundtable at Lamb's Club in New York City in January 1971 saw Lee and an assortment of other comic publishers offer a startlingly candid assessment of the place of comic creators in the cultural firmament. Archie Comics publisher John Goldwater made the very conditional boast that, "we have developed several new artists, many new writers, who have gone ahead into motion picture writing and TV. We think the comic book business is a great school. I think it's a reservoir of talent for

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[457] Dallas and Sacks 17

[458] Roy Thomas to Stan Lee, 7 Dec. 1976, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[459] Roy Thomas to Stan Lee, 7 Dec. 1976, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

people who go on for bigger and better jobs." Sid Jacobson, publisher of the child-oriented line of Harvey comics, agreed with Goldwater: "I think that where Mr. Goldwater said that this is like a school or testing ground – a way to learn perhaps other skills in other areas, this seems to be an attitude that very much permeates, I think, our type of books, which cater to a younger reader and less sophistication…."[460] Jacobson conceded that creators at Marvel and DC, with an older and more erudite readership, might view their craft differently, but Lee instead took the opportunity to bemoan both the cultural and financial role of the comic creator, at the same moment offering a glimpse into his own as-yet-unfulfilled desire to leap to other media:

> I would say that the comic book market is the worst market that there is on the face of the earth for creative talent and the reasons are numberless and legion…. Because even if you succeed, even if you reach what might be considered the pinnacle of success in comics you will be less successful, less secure and less effective than if you are just an average practitioner of your art in television, radio, movies or what have you.[461]

The Lamb's Club conversation highlights the conflicted position in which Lee found himself during the '70s and for several decades afterwards. He was one of the leaders of a field he was eager to escape, desperate for the opportunities offered by other, more culturally credible media. Yet Lee remained inextricably tied to the comic industry, the only creator widely known outside of the insular comic community. Lee was prone to lament a life he often felt was defined by missed opportunities. In a 1978 interview with *Circus Magazine*, he mused," I should have gotten out of this business twenty years

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[460] Lamb's Club Roundtable, 20 Jan. 1971, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[461] "Lamb's Club Roundtable," 20 Jan. 1971, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

ago…. I would have liked to make movies, to be a director or a screenwriter, to have a job like Norm [sic] Lear or Freddie Silverman. I'd like to be doing what I'm doing here, but in a bigger arena."[462]

Lee's pessimism in the 1970s was exacerbated by a changing marketplace that was increasingly disinterested in comics in general and superheroes in particular. The degree to which costumed heroes had fallen out of favor is illustrated by a partnership proposal from two veteran British filmmakers in early 1977. David A. Barber, a producer who had worked on films including *O Lucky Man* (1973) and *If…* (1968), and Christopher Wicking, author of several Hammer Studios horror screenplays, approached Marvel to suggest a partnership. The producers would film two Marvel movies in the United Kingdom, taking advantage of favorable film-making treaties and the generous government funding supplied by the British Film Fund Agency. Wicking and Barber had no interest in Marvel's superheroes, however; their attention was focused on the "action/adventure" and "occult/science-fiction"[463] properties the publisher had recently begun emphasizing as a reaction to shifting reader tastes. The pair suggested films based on King Kull, Solomon Kane, Ka-Zar, The Eternals, Shang-Chi, and Kilraven. Among Marvel's superheroes, only Dr. Strange interested them,[464] and then only because "the current vogue for the occult is still potent."[465]

In the early '70s, it was not Wonder Woman but a very different fictional warrior who seemed poised to save Marvel. Conan the Barbarian had been created by Robert E. Howard in 1932 and had

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[462] Ira Wolfman, "Stan Lee's New Marvels," Circus, 20 July 1978

[463] David A. Barber to Mr. J. Galton, 19 Jan. 1977, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[464] Barber and Wicking were not alone in their interest in Strange: In 1979, agent Harold S. Kant would attempt to acquire the film and TV rights to the character for a different client and Paramount Studios expressed an interest that same year (Richard Weston to Stan Lee, 9 April 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming)

[465] David A. Barber to Mr. J. Galton, 19 Jan. 1977, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

appeared in a series of stories in the sci-fi magazine *Weird Tales*. Once again demonstrating the close kinship between such publications and the comic books that eventually supplanted them, Conan was revived as a Marvel comic in 1970, featuring the writing of Roy Thomas and the evocative art of Barry Windsor-Smith. The book was Marvel's only successful launch in the late '60s/ early '70s, proving immensely popular, reviving public interest in the character, spawning a Marvel-published black-and-white magazine, *Savage Sword of Conan*, in 1974 and sparking a wave of sword-and-sorcery comic books. Barber eloquently summarizes the characters appeal to '70s comic readers – and, potentially, film fans, in his proposal to Marvel: "CONAN is a very 'modern' character, and the cynicism in his world allied to his hard-nosed sense of 'justice' make him a Dirty Harry with a sword but without a 'Death Wish'. He embodies the best of today's tough nihilism and the best of the romance of the past."[466] Barber and Wicking's interest in the character was not unique, and throughout the decade Conan would interest Hollywood far more than any of Lee's co-creations. Thomas would be heavily involved with attempts to bring the character to film, attempts which would culminate with the 1982 feature starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

In 1973, after much legal maneuvering, Marvel had managed to reclaim the options to their own characters from Steve Lemberg.[467] After several atrociously one-sided deals, Marvel at last began to approach the licensing of its intellectual properties with more seriousness, hiring veteran agent Robert Lantz to handle any issues regarding the adaptation of Marvel's properties to film or television.[468] Lee and his public persona were central to Marvel's efforts to expand their brand to other media, as a 1973 memo gushingly explained: "Marvel is far more public relations oriented than other comic-book

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[466] David A. Barber to Mr. J. Galton, 19 Jan. 1977, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[467] Marvel Comics Group, Marketing Objectives, 1973, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[468] Stan Lee to Mr. Frank Duggen, 25 Oct. 1976, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

companies. Marvel is still the only such company whose publisher makes regular trips to various campuses in order to fill speaking engagements in different parts of the country and to ensure that the name Marvel Comics Group represents something glamorous, exciting, and most important of all – something immediate to the young people of the nation.".[469]

The film and television industries, long since over their love affair with Batman and not yet enamored with Wonder Woman, had little interest in adapting comic book properties. Lee's own efforts to interest film companies in the characters he had co-created fared little better than Lemberg's. A 1974 response from one of the major studios to Lee's overtures is emblematic. Michael Mindlin, Jr., Vice President for Creative Affairs at Warner Brothers, replied to Lee's inquiries regarding possible Marvel superhero films by gently explaining, "I just can't get anyone here interested in any of these. We're probably making a big mistake – but it won't be the first." Mindberg then quickly turns the conversation to the only facet of Lee that sparked real interest in Hollywood: "When do we all see Alain's new picture?"[470]

As Lee saw one proposal after another rejected by Hollywood, he became even more eager to assert the skill needed to write comics and his own ample ability to write screenplays. In a 1974 interview, Lee explained that even the co-screenwriter of one of the era's most acclaimed scripts was unable to translate his skills to the comic medium: "Mario Puzo[471] tried to write a script for us about a year before he did 'The Godfather.' I handed it back to him – it would have taken too much trouble to teach him the style."[472] Later in the article, Lee makes clear that comic writers such as himself are not

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[469] "Marvel Comics to Go Audiovisual; Music Accented"

[470] Michael Mindlin, Jr. to Stan Lee, 7 May 1974, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[471] Puzo would, of course, try his hand at writing superhero heroics more successfully a few years later when he wrote the screenplay for the 1978 Superman film.

[472] Kissell 16

similarly bound to a single medium, explaining, "there's a textbook, 'Exploring the Film,' which wants to reproduce an entire Spiderman story – 20 pages – to demonstrate certain techniques in comics that also apply to film."[473] Such claims were not entirely uncommon for Lee: in response to a 1964 letter from a fan eager to see the Fantastic Four on TV, Lee wrote, "But, if ever we do put the F.F. on t.v., we won't even have to change our style because, although not many fans know it, Stan has had movie writing experience and is a full-fledged member of the Academy of T.V. Arts and Sciences!"[474] It is unclear what "movie writing" Lee is referring to here – no such material seems to exist. The fact remained that it was important for Lee that he make clear how easily he could move between mediums.

As the comic industry foundered, Marvel attempted to right their corporate ship by escaping their marginal cultural space for middlebrow territory. An internal Marvel Comics Group memo laying out marketing objectives for 1973 explained the motivation behind the move: "each day a new crop of sexy movies and raunchy underground commix, as well as proliferation of nudie magazines vies with us for this fickle audience." The proposed solution was to turn to more respectable middle-class media for assistance in the hope that the aura surrounding prominent authors would supersede the stigmas attached to comics: "we have adopted a policy of buying adaptation rights from well-known authors such as Robert Bloch ('Psycho') and Theodore Sturgeon ('It'), in order to attract an increasing number of quality-oriented older readers."[475] Sturgeon, tellingly, was one of the forerunners of the New Wave in sci-fi.[476] Lee set his own sights for even loftier ground, seeking out authors including Anthony Burgess, Kurt Vonnegut, Vaclav Havel, and Tom Stoppard for a proposed line of adult-oriented comics.

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[473] Kissell 16

[474] Stan Lee, "Death of a Hero!" *Fantastic Four* #32, Marvel Comics 1964

[475] Marvel Comics Group, Marketing Objectives, 1973, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[476] Burt A Folkart, "Theodore Sturgeon; Noted Science Fiction Writer," *Los Angeles Times* 11 May 1985, pg. 7

Loving Submission: The Original Wonder Woman

It would not be middle-class authors who reignited TV producers' interest in comic book IPs: instead, it would be the women's movement's appropriation and redefinition of Wonder Woman, one of the most unusual comic book superheroes. Wonder Woman first appeared in *All Star Comics* #8 in December 1941. She was not the first female superhero, but she quickly became the most famous. As originally conceived, Wonder Woman was an Amazon from Paradise Island, a utopia bereft of the polluting influence of male domination. The Amazons were followers of Aphrodite, representative of the feminine virtues of love and beauty. The goddess was opposed by Ares, god of war and the dominant force in Man's World – all of creation beyond the borders of Paradise Island. The Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyte, crafted Wonder Woman out of clay, creating a statue into which Aphrodite breathed life. Years after Wonder Woman's birth, American aviator Steve Trevor washed ashore on Paradise Island. Wonder Woman, smitten with the unconscious hunk, tricked her Mother into allowing her to accompany him back to Man's World. Assuming the role of Lieutenant Diana Prince, Wonder Woman resolved to fight for America against the Nazi menace.

No aspect of Wonder Woman was more unique then its creator, William Moulton Marston. Marston bore very little similarity to Stan Lee or the other comic creators who entered the field during the '30s and '40s. Like Lee, many of these artists and writers were young second-generation Jewish immigrants, compelled to work in a culturally marginalized industry when the doors of more respectable media outlets were closed to them. Marston, in contrast, was a middle-aged, Harvard-educated WASP who had been heavily influenced by suffragist thinkers like Emmeline Pankhurst while in college. After leaving university, Marston built a national reputation through his magazine articles, popular psychology books, and role as creator of the lie detector. Marston's personal life was decidedly unconventional, and

he lived in an open relationship with both his wife Sadie Elizabeth Holloway and his former student and assistant, Olive Byrne, niece of Margaret Sanger.[477] Marston fathered two children with each woman, and the family seems to have lived together happily, cooperating to produce the early Wonder Woman stories.

Marston was like Lee in one key respect – he was an inveterate self-promoter, and had sought to spread his unique feminist ideology as an advisor to Hollywood filmmakers. When Marston was unable to make quick headway in the entrenched world of American cinema, he turned to the much newer, less established comic industry. In 1940, Marston was welcomed by All-American Publications, one of the precursors to DC Comics, as a celebrity, and the prestige and respectability he seemed to represent convinced publisher Max Gaines to let him use their books as a way to promulgate his unusual, even shocking, views.

Marston's position outside the comic industry's standardized, editorially-driven creative process allowed him to fashion Wonder Woman as a vehicle for the delivery of a complex ideological system. While characters like Superman certainly conveyed ideas about the way the world should work, they lacked the coherence and pedagogical bent Marston brought to stories about the Amazon from Paradise Island. Journalists like Susan Faludi have linked Wonder Woman to another feminist icon of the war years, Rosie the Riveter, as the product of a moment when women moved beyond the private sphere in great numbers, taking up the jobs of men who had departed for the war.[478] The actual message underlying Marston's stories is far more radical than that implied by Rosie. The comic author was not celebrating a brief moment of female empowerment that would wane as soon as soldiers returned to their pre-war jobs. Instead, the psychologist was advocating a complete overturning of the social order, the replacement of patriarchy by matriarchy. Marston understood human nature largely in terms of submission and

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[477] Jill Lepore, The Secret History of Wonder Woman, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015)

[478] Susan Faludi, Backlash, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1991) pg. 51

dominance. Women lacked the warlike spirit of men, instead being driven by a desire for love and beauty. It was therefore desirable that men should submit themselves to female domination, becoming willing slaves. Marston believed this would prove an appealing state of affairs for most, if not all, men, as they secretly desired from boyhood to be ruled by powerful women. The only reason this situation did not exist already is because men had convinced women that they were naturally inferior.

The result of Marston's philosophy was a comic that celebrated his wildly unconventional feminism and a range of non-heteronormative sexualities. Wonder Woman's close association with female communities, both the Amazons of Paradise Island and the Holliday Girls, a cadre of girl's college students who often assisted Diana, brought frequent accusations of lesbianism. Comic historians have made a cottage industry of highlighting the elements of erotic bondage, discipline, dominance, and submission in the early Wonder Woman comics, pointing to the repeated scenes of men declaring their love of submission and noting that nearly every story featured scenes in which the heroine is tied up. In one particularly famous splash panel, Wonder Woman is depicted tied up and bent over the knee of sidekick Etta Candy, being vigorously spanked. A pleased Diana looks directly at the reader, winking and smiling in shared enjoyment of the experience of submission to another woman. As Lewis Call argues, "Marston did more than just about anyone else in mid-twentieth century America to mainstream erotic DS [dominance and submission]."[479] The sexual connotations of Marston's creation did not go unnoticed – as early as 1945, Jesuit literary critic Walter Ong argued the comic depicted, "not a healthy sex directed toward marriage and family life but an antisocial sex made as alluring as possible while its normal term in marriage is barred by the ground rules."[480]

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[479] Lewis Call, BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pg. 34

[480] quoted in Molly Rhodes, "Wonder Woman and her Disciplinary Power," Doing Science+Culture, eds. Roddey Reid and Sharon Traweek, (New York: Routledge, 2000), pg. 111

The strong ideology with which Marston imbued his creation made Diana a character ahead of her time, joining, sometimes uncomfortably, the cultural resonance of two deeply dissimilar generations of superheroes. As Ramzi Fawaz has illustrated, pre- and post-war superheroes stood in very different relation to the state and widespread notions of acceptable lifestyles.[481] The Amazing Amazon was created in a period during which superheroes tended to have explicitly nationalist connotations, and her alliance with the US military and support of the war effort seemed to place her in this camp. Like her post-war, largely Marvel-born colleagues, however, Wonder Woman and her Amazons represented a potentially queer alternative community well outside of heteropatriarchal norms.

The contradictions embodied by Wonder Woman are illustrated by her costume and the controversy surrounding it. Diana's costume is composed of American symbols such as the eagle and the stars and stripes, seemingly positioning her as a representative of the state. Yet Wonder Woman's attitude and adventures, like '60s creations The X-Men, "dramatized the politics of inequality, exclusion, and difference in postwar America,"[482] in her case in explicitly feminist ways. This confusion over the meanings of her costume has led to frequent, politically loaded redesigns of the character. When attached to the project in the mid-2000s, for instance, self-professed feminist Joss Whedon announced, "The color scheme and the silhouette have to remain because they're her. But the American flag is not what she's going to be wearing."[483] When David E. Kelley similarly tried to alter Wonder Woman's outfit for his television pilot, conservative network Fox News went on the offensive, accusing Kelley of "purging the super hero of all her trappings of Americana,"[484] complaints that ultimately contributed to the failure of

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[481] Fawaz

[482] Fawaz

[483] Jim Kozak, "Serenity Now!" *In Focus* Aug 2005

[484] Lindsay Flans, "Fox News: New 'Wonder Woman' Outfit Lacks Patriotism," *Hollywood Reporter* 18 March 2011

the series. Wonder Woman had become a social barometer as critics argued over which values should predominate in modern America.

Ironically, Marston understood Wonder Woman's costume not in nationalist terms but as a key element of his feminist challenge to the status quo. The two most important elements of Wonder Woman's costume were her golden lasso and her steel bracelets. Historians have often drawn connections between Wonder Woman's lasso and Marston's work with the lie detector, a connection that overlooks the full importance of this item of Wonder Woman's wardrobe. While in later incarnations the lasso compels those caught in its grip merely to tell the truth, in Marston's original stories it forces its captives to be fully submissive to whoever holds the end of the rope, obeying their captor's slightest command. As Queen Hippolyte instructs her daughter, "The magic lasso carries Aphrodite's power to make men and women submit to your will. Whomever you bind with that lasso must obey you!"[485] Wonder Woman's bracelets, most frequently used in later years to repel incoming bullets, were a reminder to the superhero never to submit to a man's domination. As Wonder Woman explains, "When an Amazon girl permits a man to chain her bracelets of submission together she becomes weak as other women in a man-ruled world!"[486]

William Dozier's Wonder Woman

After Marston passed away in 1947, Wonder Woman was thrust into DC's industrialized creative process, a system that was ill-equipped to handle the character's unique ideological elements. DC

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[485] William Moulton Marston, "The Origin of Wonder Woman," *Wonder Woman* No. 1, All-American Publications 1942

[486] William Moulton Marston, "The God of War," *Wonder Woman* No. 2, All-American Publications 1942

assigned Wonder Woman to Robert Kanigher, a writer known mainly for his war comics. He was given Wonder Woman primarily because he also handled many of the publisher's romance books and DC felt he might as well have another female-centered comic on his plate. Kanigher's stewardship proved an inhospitable period for the radical politics with which Marston had infused Wonder Woman. When Fredric Wertham issued his 1954 assault on comics in *Seduction of the Innocent*, the elements of the Wonder Woman mythology that invited queer readings proved a particular target. Wertham declared, "the lesbian counterpart of Batman may be found in the stories of Wonder Woman and Black Cat. The homosexual connotation of the Wonder Woman type of story is psychologically unmistakable…. Her followers are the "Holliday Girls," the holiday girls, the gay party girls, the gay girls. Wonder Woman refers to them as 'my girls.'"[487] Wertham's assault was late. Robert Kanigher had moved quickly to assert Wonder Woman's heterosexuality when he took over her the character, immediately eliminating any mention of the Holliday Girls. Kanigher also forced her into an absurdly inappropriate profession as a lonely-hearts columnist, depicted her constantly obsessing over marriage with Steve Trevor, and centered most stories around her engagement.[488] In short, Kanigher made Wonder Woman into a slightly more fantastic version of the standard romance comic heroine.

Many of the editors, writers, and artists who would follow Kanigher on *Wonder Woman* also looked at Marston's feminist messages and unconventional sexuality with contempt or, in some cases, disgust. Martin Pasko, who wrote the book during the years when the Wonder Woman television program was airing, recalls reading every one of Marston's stories after being told he was being put on the title. After completing the assignment, he stormed into editor Julie Schwartz's office and bellowed, "Julie, you won't believe how sick this shit is!"[489] This discomfort was reflected in and exacerbated by

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[487] Wertham

[488] Philip Sandifer, <u>A Golden Thread</u>, (Eruditorum Press, 2013) pg. 76

[489] "Martin Pasko," *Five Questions With…,* 7 Jan. 2013, http://fivequestionswith.wordpress.com/martin-pasko/

the constant reinvention creators inflicted on the character.[490] This instability can be demonstrated by a brief mention of Wonder Woman's career history. Both Superman and Batman have had stable employment for their alter egos – the former as a reporter, the latter as a millionaire playboy – since the moment of their creation. Over her 70-year existence, Wonder Woman and her alter-ego Diana Prince have been employed for multiple issues as a nurse, a secretary (both for the Army and for the superhero organization the Justice Society of America), a secret agent (for various agencies both fictional and real), an astronaut, an ambassador, a CEO, a fashion model, a lonely-hearts columnist, a boutique owner, and a fast-food taco-joint waitress. Pasko accurately described the character's post-Marston history as "a lot of desperate floundering."[491]

Ultimately, Wonder Woman survived the superhero cull that followed World War II primarily because DC hoped to bring the Amazon to other media. After all, Superman had jumped almost immediately to radio, animated films, newspaper strips, and eventually television. DC hoped to capitalize on Wonder Woman in a similar fashion, and in the years following the war the comic publisher entered talks to launch a film serial based on the character. Despite DC's best efforts, however, Wonder Woman remained almost entirely confined to comics throughout the '40s, '50s, and '60s. The only products of DC's efforts at adaptation were a newspaper strip that quickly failed and a radio play released as a record.[492] Gradually, Wonder Woman became best known not for her own sake but due to the fact that her book had been continually published since its debut, a feat she shared with only Batman and Superman.

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[490] All comic characters are subject to periodic reimaginings, as new creators seek to cater the character to the current audience and writer's own personal preferences. Such changes are a result of a serialized medium produced monthly for a small, fixed, demanding audience. Even within the standards of the industry, however, Wonder Woman has been subject to frequent and seemingly aimless alteration.

[491] "Martin Pasko"

[492] Les Daniels, Wonder Woman: The Complete History (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000)

The first concerted effort to bring Wonder Woman to the screen came in the mid-60s. Producer William Dozier, flush with the success of the *Batman* series, cast about for another comic star to give his camp/pop TV treatment. Dozier felt *Wonder Woman*'s more fantastic elements – and its female protagonist – were perfectly suited to the broad comic treatment he had planned. His choice of screenwriters made the intended tone of the planned series abundantly clear – he enlisted Stan Hart and Larry Siegel, a pair of writers best known for their work on *Mad*. [493]

In 1967 Dozier commissioned *Who's Afraid of Diana Prince?* a 5-minute test scene for the program. The central 'joke' of the series is made clear in this brief episode. William Dozier, acting as narrator as he had done on *Batman*, introduces the protagonist: "Wonder Woman, who knows she has the strength of Hercules; who knows she has the wisdom of Athena; who knows she has the speed of Mercury; and who <u>thinks</u> she has the beauty of Aphrodite." As these words are spoken, the actress playing Wonder Woman poses seductively before a mirror. As the longer treatment explains, "Her body is shapeless and a bit ungainly," her face bearing "the stamp of anonymity."[494] In other words, Dozier's heroine is absurd because she lacks the stereotypical markers of media-friendly femininity such as a pronounced bosom or shapely hips. The character's physical androgyny is highlighted when she gazes in a mirror and imagines her reflection as that of model-actress Linda Harrison, best known for playing Nova in *Planet of the Apes* (1968). Diana vamps in front of the mirror for almost a minute as the soundtrack croons "Oh You Beautiful Doll," all the better to contrast her body with that presented in the

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[493] Dave Kaufman, "H'wood Vidpix Mills Priming For Comic Book Thrust in 'Batman' Wake," *Variety* Vol 241 Iss. 10, 26 Jan. 1966

[494] Stan Hart and Larry Siegel, <u>Who's Afraid of Diana Prince</u>, William Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

mirror. Eventually, Wonder Woman leaps through a window and flies away, performing a pirouette that, in its unfeminine awkwardness and lack of grace, once again highlights her physical absurdity.[495]

At roughly the same time Dozier was producing the test footage featuring his version of Wonder Woman, a new feminist consciousness was beginning to form among many of the women involved in the social movements of the era. It would be hard to imagine a scenario that more perfectly captured the media depictions of women that the nascent women's movement would struggle against then Dozier's planned Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman, the treatment makes clear, is extremely capable and unfailingly heroic. She "can fly at an incredibly swift speed, easily outracing the fastest missile. She also exhibits superhuman strength, intelligence, hearing, and eyesight."[496] Despite all of this, she is presented to the audience as an object of derision, laughable because her body fails to conform to the media-created ideal of femininity.

Dozier and his associates tried to cloak the program in the familiar language of camp, claiming that it carried on the pop art sensibility that had made *Batman* a trendy smash. Yet as Susan Sontag explained, "When self-parody lacks ebullience but instead reveals (even sporadically) a contempt for one's themes and one's materials… the results are forced and heavy-handed, rarely Camp."[497] Such contempt bubbles from Dozier's treatment. Males are routinely "revolted" by the clumsy advances of the program's protagonist. This same distaste is evident in the comments of Charles B. FitzSimons, one of the producers of both the *Batman* series and the *Wonder Woman* test scene. Summing the proposed

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[495] "Wonder Woman 1967 Screen Test/ TV Pilot," *Youtube*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWiiXs2uU1k (Oct 25, 2013)

[496] Hart and Siegel

[497] Sontag

program up almost thirty years after the fact, FitzSimons explains, "the whole plot was that she was an ugly bitch who, because she got vanity instead of beauty, thought she was God's gift to men!"[498]

Ultimately, *Batman* floundered, concerns about violence on television intensified, the TV superhero craze never manifested, and Dozier's *Wonder Woman* never went to series and was relegated to the dustbin of historical curiosities. One of the men who saw the misbegotten test scene, however, was Douglas S. Cramer, vice president of television program development at 20th Century Fox.[499] The idea of a series based on the Amazon heroine stuck with Cramer.

Over the next decade a number of producers, particularly Dozier and Cramer, would intermittently try to launch Wonder Woman television projects. In 1973 Dozier contacted Ruth Buzzi, offering her the lead role in a revamped version of his 1967 Wonder Woman program. Buzzi expressed interest but voiced concern about the more troubling aspects of the script: "rather than be a dumpy, stupid-looking Wonder Woman, I felt <u>very strongly</u> that I should look as TERRIFIC a Wonder Woman as I could possibly appear. Let the 'funny' come out of what she said, did…"[500] Warner Bros. sought to involve an even more unlikely personality in its efforts to produce a feature based on Wonder Woman, attempting to interest Mel Brooks in the character as he finished up production of *Blazing Saddles* in 1973.[501] In all the attempts to launch a Wonder Woman project, no one seems to have considered the idea of a female hero as anything other than comedy.

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[498] Pat Jankiewicz, "Comics on Celluloid," *Starlog Presents Batman and Other Comic Heroes* no. 1, 1997

[499] Dan Pasternack, "Stanley Ralph Ross interview," 11 Feb. 1998, *Archive of American Television*, http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/stanley-ralph-ross

[500] Ruth Buzzi to William Dozier, 10 Aug 1973, William Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[501] Cynthia Littleton, [untitled], *Hollywood Reporter*, April 18, 2005

It was the increasing popularity of the women's movement and the media's fascination with Gloria Steinem that eventually jumpstarted Hollywood's efforts to translate Wonder Woman off of the comic page. In the mid-60s, a group of women including *Feminine Mystique* author Betty Friedan founded the National Organization of Woman (NOW). NOW sought to address a wide range of social injustices facing American women using the existing channels of the political system. At roughly the same time, members of a younger generation of women who had been involved in the social struggles of the '60s began to realize that many of the progressive organizations leading these campaigns were rife with the same sexist attitudes and patriarchal structures that plagued all of American society. This realization led to the development of a new feminist consciousness that manifested in the formation of a variety of organizations such as The Redstockings and The Feminists, more radical alternatives to NOW. [502]

References to Wonder Woman and the Amazon myth that informed her creation appeared frequently in material released by the women's movement. For instance, a poster for Feminist Health Centers urging women to seize control of their own medical care featured Wonder Woman standing over the defeated forms of male healthcare providers, swinging a speculum at a cowering man and declaring, "With my speculum, I AM strong! I CAN fight!"[503] Mainstream publications noted the connection between the comic star and the women's movement, as when a 1973 issue of *TIME* sneeringly remarked

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[502] Alice Ecchols, Daring to be Bad, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989) pg 119

[503] Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, eds., *Dear Sisters* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000) 123

that adult film star Linda Lovelace was, "unaware that she may be joining Wonder Woman in the underground pantheon of women's liberation."[504]

In the mid-70s, no individual was as closely linked to Wonder Woman as feminist Gloria Steinem. In the early years of the decade, the media had latched onto the accomplished journalist as the spokesperson for the woman's movement. The feminist movement was big news, but the organizations involved tended to eschew organizational hierarchies, viewing them as a key element of the patriarchy they opposed. Those leaders who did emerge, women like Kate Millett and Bella Abzug, were dismissed by the media as insufficiently photogenic to serve as the face of the movement. Steinem, who conformed to many traditional notions of femininity and offered the media an attractive, non-threatening talking head, quickly became one of the best-known feminists in the country.[505]

Steinem was no stranger to the comic industry. In 1960, she assumed one of her first jobs in the print media when she took a job at the new comic *Help!*[506] as assistant editor under Harvey Kurtzman, best known as the creator of *Mad*.[507] But Steinem's love for the medium was largely a product of her fondness for Wonder Woman. In the mid-60s Steinem sought to acquire the rights to the character for a stage musical she hoped to write.[508] Decades later, when Joel Silver was attempting to produce a Wonder Woman film, Steinem was one of numerous writers to produce a screenplay for the proposed feature.[509] Upon learning on a tour of DC's offices in 1972 that the publisher had deprived their most prominent

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504 "Wonder Woman," *Time* Vol.101 Iss. 3, 15 Jan. 1973, pg. 50

505 Carolyn G. Helibrun, Education of a Woman: The Life of Gloria Steinem (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1995)

506 *Help!* was a fumetti – a comic featuring live actors – and Steinem was responsible for booking celebrities to appear in the stories. When she left the position several years later, she was replaced by future Python Terry Gilliam.

507 Jon B. Cooke, "The James Warren Interview," *TwoMorrows*, 20 Jan. 2014 http://twomorrows.com/comicbookartist/articles/04warren.html

508 Heilbrun 128

509 "Woody's Musical… Italy Snubs Radford… Travolta Triumphant," *Sight and Sound* Vol. 6 Iss. 6, Jun 1996, pg. 5

female hero of her superhuman abilities, Steinem voiced her dissatisfaction with the change and the publisher quickly returned the character to her superpowered roots.[510]

In 1972, two publications were released that would cement the connection between Gloria Steinem and Wonder Woman and play an integral part in shaping the version of the character that appeared on television screens in 1975. The first was the premiere issue of *Ms. Magazine*, the cover of which featured an image of the Amazon princess towering over a city block. *Ms.* was an attempt by Steinem and her colleagues to place the content of liberal feminism within the form of a glossy mass-market women's magazine. As Amy Erdman Farrell points out, Wonder Woman seemed the ideal icon for the brand of feminism the magazine was attempting to popularize. Not only did the use of a recognizable pop culture figure welcome mainstream readers, Wonder Woman's red, white, and blue outfit tied the woman's movement to traditional patriotic notions of freedom and equality while simultaneously making it clear that the magazine advocated achieving social change through traditional democratic channels.[511]

Steinem further refined her vision of Wonder Woman as a liberal feminist superhero in the introduction to a volume of Marston's original stories released that same year. The superhero Steinem invoked was the embodiment of "many of the values of the women's culture that feminists are now trying to introduce into the mainstream: strength and self-reliance for women; sisterhood and mutual support among women; peacefulness and esteem for human life; a diminishment of "masculine" aggression and of the belief that violence is the only way of solving conflicts."[512] Steinem also worked to distance Wonder

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[511] Amy Erdman Farrell, Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism (Raleigh, University of North Carolina Press, 1998)

[512] Gloria Steinem, "Introduction," Wonder Woman (Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1972)

Woman from the more troubling aspects of Marston's vision, downplaying issues of dominance and submission and dismissing the psychologist's essentialist belief that women were innately different – and superior – to men. Steinem contended that the hint "that women are biologically, and therefore immutably, superior to men"[513] is a position with which few feminists would agree. Steinem's negation of this essentializing tendency within the early Wonder Woman strips demonstrates the extent to which she was attempting to claim the figure as a symbol of a liberal feminism capable of gaining widespread support.

The care with which Gloria Steinem was crafting her Amazon reflected the degree to which the Wonder Woman mythology could appeal to multiple types of feminists. In denying that any feminists shared Marston's essentialist view of gender, for instance, Steinem ignored Cell 16, who posited the existence of a malignant "male concept." In arguing that this concept, innate in all men, "has created a chaotic world, - massive powers destroying each other in the quest for more power,"[514] Cell 16 came very close to reiterating the philosophy that underlay Wonder Woman's entire existence. The influence of the ideas that Cell 16 articulated would only grow during the early '70s with the increasing influence of "cultural feminism." Many of the adherents of this branch of feminism would advocate precisely what Steinem denied, that there exists an essential difference between the genders.[515] Indeed, the Amazon myth of which Wonder Woman is a manifestation would come to be heavily associated with this particular segment of the women's movement.

The nature of Wonder Woman's birth also conjured up troubling associations Steinem was eager to obscure. More radical elements of the women's liberation movement viewed the process of reproduction as integral to women's oppression and, inspired by emerging technologies of cloning and in

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[513] Steinem

[514] Ecchols 165

[515] Ecchols 244

vitro fertilization, speculated about ways in which reproduction might take place outside of the female body.[516] Most prominently, Shulamith Firestone declared in her 1970 bestseller *The Dialectic of Sex* that "pregnancy is barbaric,"[517] and made women's liberation from the tyranny of reproduction a key component of her demands for a feminist revolution.[518] Writers such as Marge Piercy took up Firestone's call for a feminist utopian literature and authored books such as *Woman on the Edge of Time*, depicting a future in which babies gestate in tanks.[519] When Firestone issued her call to creative action by declaring, "We haven't even a literary image of this future society; there is not even a utopian feminist literature yet in existence,"[520] she was of course overlooking the decades old example of Marston's Wonder Woman, a situation Steinem hoped to continue.

The greatest threat to Steinem's liberal feminist Wonder Woman, however, came from the lesbian undertones that had excited the ire of Fredric Wertham. As Steinem wrote, a split between lesbian and straight feminists was threatening to rip apart the women's movement. Betty Friedan, president of NOW, had famously labeled lesbianism a "lavender menace" that would damn the movement in the eyes of the media. In response to such attitudes, Rita Mae Brown[521] led a protest at the second Congress to Unite Women. The issue only became more divisive, however, as political-lesbianism groups like The Furies formed and Friedan organized a purge of the upper ranks of NOW of suspect individuals.[522] The tumult in the women's movement may even have found its way into the pages of superhero comics; in February

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[516] Alice Adams, "Out of the Womb," *Feminist Studies* vol 19 n 2

[517] Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex, (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1970)

[518] Sarah Lefanu, In the Chinks of the World Machine, (Ontario: The Women's Press Ltd. 1988)

[519] Lefanu

[520] Firestone

[521] In an intriguing connection, Brown's longtime partner Fannie Flagg appeared as an Amazon in the pilot film of the Lynda Carter Wonder Woman series.

[522] Ecchols 212

1972, several months after the formation of the Furies Collective, Jack Kirby introduced The Female

Furies into the DC comic universe. The Furies were an all-woman organization of highly trained warriors

such as Lashina, Big Barda, and Stompa who worked under sadistic orphanage superintendent Granny

Goodness. At the behest of Darkseid, the demonic warlord who was one of DC's most powerful villains,

they regularly plagued DC's heroes. It is not clear whether Kirby was directly inspired by the radical

feminist group.

Amazon mythology held a particular appeal to radical lesbians as indicated by works such as

Amazon Expedition: A Lesbian/Feminist Anthology (1973), *Amazon Poetry* (1975) and, most notably, Ti-

Grace Atkinson's 1974 *Amazon Odyssey*.[523] Steinem would have been very aware of the potential

connections between the lesbian separatist movement and elements of the Wonder Woman myth. In

arguing, "Wonder Woman's family of Amazons on Paradise Island, her band of college girls in America,

and her efforts to save individual women are all welcome examples of women working together and

caring about each other's welfare,"[524] she put an innocuous spin on some of the elements of Diana's

backstory that invited queer readings.

Steinem's interpretation of the character as an avatar of liberal feminism did not go unchallenged.

Steinem's elevation to movement spokesperson by the media and her seeming acceptance of that role ran

counter to the extreme egalitarianism central to many of the more radical strands of '70s feminism. By

the middle of the decade, the success of *Ms.*'s brand of liberal feminism, the rise of cultural feminism, and

the disintegration of several prominent radical groups such as the Furies or the original Redstockings

seemed to presage the end of more extreme philosophies of women's liberation. In May 1975, in an

attempt to reassert radicalism as a significant part of the women's movement, the reformed Redstockings

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[523] Diane Griffin Crowder, "Amazons," <u>Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage</u>, ed. Claude J. Summers (New York: Routledge, 2002)

[524] Steinem

accused Steinem of cooperating with the CIA and insinuated that *Ms.* was a government effort to extinguish radical feminism.[525] As part of these charges, the Redstockings contended Wonder Woman was not an empowering figure of sisterhood and female self-reliance, instead claiming she, "reflects the anti-people attitude of the "liberal feminists" and matriachists who look to mythical and supernatural heroines and "models" while ignoring or denigrating the achievements and struggles of down-to-earth women. It leads to the "liberated woman," individualist line that denies the need for a movement, and implies that when women don't make it, it's their own fault."[526]

The Redstockings read Wonder Woman as fundamentally opposed to the cooperative action and egalitarianism they felt lay at the heart of feminism. Their comments predict the Warrior Woman moment of the mid-90s, when an individualist zeitgeist would combine with a renewed pop-culture interest in the state of American women to produce a series of programs featuring Wonder-Woman-inspired fighting women.

Steinem's interest in the character resonated through pop culture. A September 20, 1971 *Washington Post* headline reported "Gloria, Gloria in Richmond: Wonder-Woman Steinem Wings into Richmond."[527] In a 1973 episode of ABC's *The Burns and Schreiber Comedy Hour*, Ruth Buzzi finally got her shot at portraying the prominent superhero. The skit revolved around a conflict over the use of a phone booth between Buzzi's Wonder Woman and a rotund, mustachioed Superman played by host Avery Schreiber. While Superman needs to use the booth to change, Wonder Woman wants to "call Gloria Steinem." Superman quickly recognizes Wonder Woman from the cover of *Ms.* and argues that he

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[525] Echols 265

[526] "redstocking's statement," *Off Our Backs* Vol. 5 No. 6, July 1975

[527] "Gloria, Gloria in Richmond," *Washington Post*, 20 Sept. 1971

is "a strong supporter of woman's lib," to which an unconvinced Buzzi replies, "Oh, is that why you keep Lois Lane around to sharpen your pencils?"[528]

The culture producers who would create the Wonder Woman television program, like the general public, understood Wonder Woman largely in terms of Steinem's usage of the character as a liberal-feminist icon. In her 1973 letter to Dozier regarding his ill-conceived Wonder Woman comedy, Ruth Buzzi correctly suggested that the renewed interest in the character, six years after the last attempt to bring her to television, was a product of the *Ms. Magazine* cover.[529] Producer Douglas Cramer explained to Screen Gems' Art Frankel that his interest in the character had been reinvigorated because, "She seems to be the forerunner for Woman's Lib and more timely than ever."[530] Cramer, pilot screenwriter Stanley Ralph Ross, and star Lynda Carter all based their interpretation of the character on the version Steinem described in her introduction to the collection of Marston stories.[531] In an era in which comic reprints were not readily available, it stands to reason that readers interested in a character would be drawn to a particularly prominent volume of collected material. It is intriguing, however, to note the extent to which Steinem's reading of the character influenced the men and women who would produce the 1975 series.

Nobody in Hollywood was as eager to capitalize on Wonder Woman's newfound prominence as Douglas Cramer. Formerly executive vice president in charge of production for Paramount Television, Cramer had been integral in the creation of programs as diverse as *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) and *Mission: Impossible* (1966-1973) before starting his own production company in 1971. When Wonder Woman graced the cover of *Ms.* in 1972, Cramer recalled the Dozier test scene he had viewed at Fox five

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[528] "Burns and Schreiber Comedy Hour (1974) Wonderwoman vs Superman with Ruth Buzzi," *youtube*, 10 Jan. 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wm5IYPzAaZ8

[529] Aug 10, 1973 letter from Ruth Buzzi to William Dozier, William Dozier Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[530] Elana Levine, Wallowing in Sex, (Durham: Duke University Press 2007)

[531] *Fanfare* No. 1, Spring 1977; Andy Mangels, "Lynda Carter: She's Still a Wonder" *Back Issue* No. 5, July 2004

years earlier and resolved to finally bring the character to television. Discovering that Warner Bros. had no intention of parting with the rights to the character, he explored several other potential Amazon-themed projects[532] and considered moving forward with a Wonder Woman rip-off named "Wondra" or "Super Woman." [533]

Cramer's enthusiasm for an action series featuring a powerful female lead was not widespread in Hollywood during the early '70s. John H. Mitchell, president of Screen Gems, reacted to Cramer's excitement about the material with ambivalence. In a 1973 letter, Mitchell urged caution:

> I would call your attention, however, to the singular lack of success and believability attendant to any creative efforts in the past that have involved a woman private eye. It is very difficult to make believable a woman in real physical jeopardy.

> I am not as excited as you all apparently are about this idea, but I certainly will not frustrate your exploration.[534]

Lynda Carter recalls the same ambivalence, explaining, "they were a little dodgy about women in lead roles in television anyway, let alone a dual role. They just didn't think we had a TVQ.[535] They didn't think viewers would tune in to see a woman on television. They would tune to see men, but not women."[536]

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[532] Levine

[533] Allan Rice to Doug Cramer, 18 Jul. 1973, Doug Cramer Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[534] John H. Mitchell to Doug Cramer, 14 June 1973, Doug Cramer Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[535] TVQ is a television marketing measurement term.

[536] Mangels

Warner Bros., meanwhile, attempted to capitalize on Wonder Woman's newfound popularity with a project of their own. In March 1974, the studio produced a live-action *Wonder Woman* TV movie starring former tennis star Cathy Lee Crosby. In the film Wonder Woman, clad in a red tracksuit, pursues criminal mastermind Abner Smith (Ricardo Montalban) to his lair in the wall of the Grand Canyon. Remarkably for a film in which the central set piece involves various characters painting and washing a donkey in increasingly elaborate ways, the film lacks even the appeal of camp. Although ostensibly still an Amazon from a secret island, the movie reflects Warner Bros. desire to reshape the character in the mold of box-office-draw James Bond.[537] Lacking superpowers, the Crosby *Wonder Woman* is reminiscent of the powerless comic incarnation against which Steinem protested during her tour of DC, indicating a fundamental misunderstanding of why the character was so important to the feminist movement.

The Crosby *Wonder Woman* scored well enough in the ratings that Warner Bros. interest in exploiting the character continued, but the studio disliked the telefilm's version of the superhero almost as much as did the critics.[538] The studio finally reached an agreement with Douglas Cramer, and by the summer of 1974, the producer was moving aggressively to develop *Wonder Woman*, although it was unclear whether the project would be a theatrical feature, television movie, or series.[539]

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[537] Ed Gross, "Wonder Woman Exclusive: An Interview with Cathy Lee Crosby," *ComicBookMovie*, 10 Dec. 2012 http://www.comicbookmovie.com/fansites/scifimediazone/news/?a=71139

[538] Levine

[539] Jul 19, 1974 letter from W.L. Baumes to Cramer, Doug Cramer Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

<u>The Ballad of Fonzie and Hawkeye</u>

Douglas Cramer's *Wonder Woman* debuted as a feature-length pilot on ABC in 1975 at a moment when television producers and programmers were torn between the progressive concern for social issues of the '60s and a swelling conservative backlash.[540] On any given Tuesday night in the fall of 1974 viewers could flip between programs representative of two opposing programming strategies simply by changing channels. At 8:00 America could tune into ABC's nostalgic *Happy Days* (1974-1984), a paean to the good old-fashioned American values that the '60s had seemingly obliterated. The tale of the family Cunningham was in line with a longing for the '50s that ran through contemporary pop-culture products like George Lucas' *American Graffiti* (1973). The trend reflected a more widespread desire among viewers, exhausted by Watergate, Vietnam, and a spreading cynicism about American institutions, to use pop culture as an escape. A major study by ABC in March 1975 discovered a pronounced longing for a return to "traditional values" in television programming.[541] The popularity of *Happy Days*, which offered such an escape, would help turn ABC from a perpetual also-ran in the network ratings race to a seemingly unassailable leader by the end of the decade.

At 8:30, the American public could flip over to another program ostensibly set in a bygone era, the Korean War hospital sit-com *M*A*S*H** (1972-1983). The wartime comedy, an obvious commentary on the Vietnam War, was one of the products of programming guru Fred Silverman's incredibly fertile period at CBS in the early '70s. In 1970, Silverman had graduated from his position as head of daytime television to the far loftier perch of Vice President, Programs. Silverman quickly established CBS as the number 1 network in the nation with a string of programs that addressed social

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[540] The character had previously appeared as a cartoon character, debuting on a 1972 episode of the Brady Bunch cartoon before becoming a regular on Superfriends

[541] Sally Bedell, <u>Up the Tube</u> (New York: Viking Adult, 1981) pg. 123

issues head on, finding laughter in racial discrimination, war, abortion, and a host of other issues earlier sit-coms would never have touched. Hits like *All In the Family* (1971-1979), *Maude* (1972-1978), *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), *Good Times* (1974-1979), and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) seemed to offer the promise of a boldly adult new direction in prime-time entertainment.

Wonder Woman offered producers and programmers a way to steer through this fraught cultural landscape, to negotiate between seemingly diametrically opposed forces. The program featured a female protagonist who delivered speeches influenced by mainstream liberal feminism while conforming to traditional notions of femininity and offering viewers a new sex symbol to ogle. The character's comic book origins also proved a boon, as the medium's reputation as kids' stuff allowed producers to slip moderately progressive viewpoints past an audience not on guard for socially relevant content. The program that emerged reflected this complicated negotiation between conflicting views, speaking to female viewers with two voices, "one insisting [they] were equal, the other insisting [they] were subordinate,"[542] a situation Susan Douglas has identified as endemic among pop culture addressed to a female audience.

Few issues were of as much concern to programmers in the '70s as how best to portray women in order to please the widest popular audience. Women had been one of the most desirable audience segments for broadcasters since the advent of the medium and as audience-measuring techniques grew more sophisticated, the importance of female viewers only increased. By the late '60s sponsors were obsessed with appealing to women between the ages of 18 and 49, a group research showed had the most disposable income and made most household buying decisions, without alienating other portions of the audience. As feminism became increasingly popular in 1972 and 1973 thanks to vehicles like *Ms. Magazine*, the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and the Battle of the Sexes between

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[542] Susan Douglas, <u>Where the Girls Are</u> (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994) 10

Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, the question of how best to appeal to female viewers became even more confusing for the (mostly male) individuals responsible for filling network line-ups. A series of highly publicized complaints from feminist organizations regarding the role of women both in front of and behind the camera made culture producers even more wary of how they portrayed female characters.

One product of programmers' struggle with this issue was the proliferation of what Elana Levine terms "New Woman" programs. In these programs broadcasters resolved to show powerful women but at the same moment reaffirm sexual difference and traditional notions of physical attractiveness, presenting "the persistence of femaleness and femininity even as women took on… conventionally male roles."[543] *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, launched in 1971, was one of the first examples of this new type of program, with Mary Richards becoming a successful newswoman and making it on her own after ditching her long-time boyfriend.

As the decade wore on, producers began taking advantage of the sexual revolution rippling through society by wooing viewers with increasingly titillating material. A glance at a list of projects being developed by Douglas Cramer in the Summer of 1974 – telefilms including *Four Wives and Their Secrets*, *The Sex Symbol*, and *Girls in Bondage*[544] - gives a strong indication of the prurient appeal increasingly favored by programmers. As part of this shift towards sexually tantalizing programming, producers began focusing more heavily on the pulchritudinous charms of their "new woman" protagonists. Paul Klein, NBC's Executive Vice President of Programs, dismissed such shows as "jiggle" television, programs designed to capitalize on young women running about sans bra.[545] As *Happy Days* producer Garry Marshall quipped, "It used to be that when the set jiggled you called the repairman; now,

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[543] Levine 133

[544] W.L. Baumes to Cramer, 19 July 1974, Douglas Cramer Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[545] Bedell

when it doesn't jiggle, you turn it off."[546] Fred Silverman sensed the changing taste of the viewing

audience quickly, and in 1976 the man largely responsible for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* gave America

Charlie's Angels.

TV's increasing focus on sex was matched by an increasingly energetic backlash. Worries about

the effect of television on youth had diminished little since the public discussion about children's

programming in the late '60s. In 1974, nebulous worries about the state of television coalesced around

the telefilm *Born Innocent*, which featured a scene in which 14-year-old reform-school inmate Linda

Blair was raped by several other girls. *Born Innocent*, one of many made-for-TV movies in the mid- and

early '70s that garbed sexual sensationalism in social relevance, quickly became the new popular

embodiment of television's threat to American youth. The FCC, moved to action by threats from

congress, began once more pressuring the networks to self-regulate. In February of 1975, the three

networks agreed to add a new scheduling policy to the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) TV

Code setting aside the first hour of prime time for "family viewing," removing sex and violence from the

timeslot. The idea of a "family hour" had been proposed by the surgeon general in 1971, during the

controversy regarding televised violence that helped drive superheroes off the air for several years.

Though the policy was ruled unconstitutional by US District Court in November 1976, the networks

continued to enforce it unofficially.[547]

Wonder Woman seemed an ideal program for the complex series of cultural forces convening in

the mid-70s. Diana Prince was undoubtedly a powerful woman, but as played by Lynda Carter she also

conformed precisely to traditional notions of feminine attractiveness. The first season of episodes

invariably featured at least one scene during which Wonder Woman delivered a message inspired by the

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[546] Robert Lindsey, "TV Tunes in Sex as Crime Fades," *New York Times*, 20 March 1978

[547] Levine

increasingly mainstream liberal feminist movement. Gently chastising an aging beauty pageant veteran bemoaning her advancing years, Diana explained, "It's unfair to judge yourself by the criterion of age - a vital intelligent woman is much more than the sum of her birthdays."[548] In another early storyline, Wonder Woman is captured by the prominent female Nazi Fausta Grables. During her interrogation, Diana watches as a small-minded male colleague berates Fausta. Wonder Woman interjects, "Fraulein Grables, you are a woman of great intelligence and should not be taking orders from that man." After Fausta rebels against her misogynist German colleagues and joins the Allied underground, Wonder Woman congratulates her: "You're an example to women all over the world who want to be free." Fausta, in a gesture of universal sisterhood, replies: "You showed me the way, and now I must show others."[549] The episode, which plays a bit like a violent two-woman consciousness-raising session, is precisely the sort of material for which Steinem praised Marston's original comics.

Of course, these feminist sentiments were delivered by a heroine wearing an American flag bathing suit. The program's infectious theme song made the link between women's liberation and patriotism explicit, exhorting Wonder Woman to fight "for [her] rights and the old red, white, and blue." Each week, Wonder Woman worked to protect the "traditional" values, and Lynda Carter saw this aspect of the program as vital to its popularity: "people want fantasy, romance and old-fashioned ideas. They are tired of violence and overkill… old-fashioned ethics are becoming new-fashioned. Truth and beauty are in."[550] By setting Wonder Woman's adventures in 1942 producers ensured a constant flow of patriotic plotlines and further muted any outrage conservative audience members might feel at Diana's relatively

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[548] *Wonder Woman,* "The Feminum Mystique: Part 1," 6 Nov 1976

[549] *Wonder Woman* "Beauty on Parade," 13 Oct. 1976

[550] R. Allen Leider, "Lynda Carter: Wonder Woman Copes With Career vs. Marriage," *Celebrity* Vol 3 Iss 10, Oct 1977.

mild feminist messages. After all, Wonder Woman's speeches regarding women's rights would be directed against fiendish Nazis and not red-blooded American authority figures.

A moment from the pilot film neatly illustrates how the 1942 context blunted social criticism. In Marston's Wonder Woman origin story, Diana meets a theatrical agent who persuades her to take her bullet-deflecting abilities onto the stage. When Wonder Woman announces she is ending her show business career, the agent absconds with her share of the earnings but is quickly caught by his erstwhile client. The moment, in its original context, was an early, playful illustration of the greed and dishonesty endemic to a world ruled by men. In the pilot film, the agent (Red Buttons) is now a Nazi spy, his evil not due to the corruption inherent in Man's World but to his affiliation with an enemy government.

Wonder Woman also attempted to satisfy its audience's taste for sex and violence offering generous helpings of fisticuffs and "jiggle." Episodes found every excuse imaginable to place Wonder Woman in revealing outfits, sending her undercover in beauty contests and other settings justifying minimal clothing. This prurient appeal was hidden in a superhero comic adaptation, a genre understood as harmless children's fare. *Wonder Woman* proved the perfect vehicle for returning sex and violence to the Family Hour. The trick didn't fool everyone - *Variety* wrote indignantly that, "The objective of this ABC pilot is quite obviously to get some good old-fashioned video violence into the "family viewing time"[551] and a study by the AMA-sponsored National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting found the program to be one of the five most violent on television.[552] American viewers seemed less distressed by the program's contents, and ratings for the series were stellar.

Feminist reactions to the network's Wonder Woman efforts were decidedly mixed. As Allison Perlman has illustrated, NOW and other second-wave feminists did not feel "quality" programs like the

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[551] "The New Original Wonder Woman" *Variety* Vol. 281 Iss. 1, 12 Nov. 1975, pg 45

[552] "13-Week TViolence In-Decks: How the Cards Fall In" *Variety* Vol. 290 Iss. 1, 8 Feb. 1978

Mary Tyler Moore Show and *All in the Family* indicated television had fallen in line with progressive social goals. Instead, they viewed these as minor irregularities in a televisual flow that continued to offer Americans a patriarchal view of women. They reflected this belief by regularly challenging stations with petitions-to-deny license renewal.[553] It is no surprise, then, that NOW VP Toni Carabillo was unimpressed by the empowered woman on display in the Crosby Wonder Woman TV movie, pointing out that "Superman in drag is not what we had in mind"[554] while fighting against discrimination both in front of and behind the camera.

<p style="text-align:center;">The New Original Wonder Woman</p>

Even though the show tempered *Wonder Woman*'s feminist messages with patriotic trappings and a 1942 setting, network executives were still uncomfortable. Press materials and interviews with the cast worked to further blunt the show's advocacy of women's issues. Almost every story framed star Lynda Carter as a sex symbol, referring to the actress as "statuesque" and gleefully relating the size of her chest ("an impressive size 38").[555] Articles also adored quoting Cramer's assessment of the type of actress they had sought for the role, one "built like a javelin thrower but with the sweet face of Mary Tyler-Moore." [556] When asked about her opinions on the women's movement, Carter would reply with a vague endorsement of equal pay for equal work, a stance Ruth Rosen has identified as a way for women profiled by the media in the '70s to, "nod to feminism even as they distanced themselves from the media's hardly recognizable

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[553] Allison Perlman, "Feminists in the Wasteland," *Feminist Media Studies* vol. 7, iss. 4

[554] "Programming By Pressure," *Variety* Vol. 274, Iss. 3, 27 Feb. 1974

[555] Bill Davidson, "From the Pages of Comic Books…" *TV guide.* iss 1244, n 5, 1/29/77 – 2/4/77: see also Karl Fleming, "Wonder Woman's Secret Weapon," *Us* Vol 1 Nos. 11, 20 Sept. 1977.: Leider

[556] Davidson; Susan Moss, "Wonder Woman's Lynda Carter: 'I'm A Ham!'" *Preview,* Vol 1, N 10, June 1977.

version of the movement."[557] Carter frequently added an addendum reassuring readers of her adherence to traditional gender roles. An excerpt from a 1977 *Celebrity Magazine* article is typical: "My feelings about all that are that I am already liberated, and I don't want to be liberated any more, because then I wouldn't be liberated…. Being married doesn't lessen my freedom; it gives me more. Now I have the protection of Ron. That means I can step out harder and further in what I want to do than before. And that is NOT very 'women's lib'."[558]

The Ron mentioned above is talent agent Ron Samuels, who married actress Lynda Carter in 1977. The press used coverage of the relationship to assure readers that even Wonder Woman was locked in a traditional heterosexual marriage, a submissive and obedient helpmate to her powerful partner. A sub-heading to an *Us* article concerning the pair made Samuels' total control explicit, blaring, "Hubby Ron Samuels may be Lynda Carter's Svengali but TV's Wonder Woman likes it that way." The article lets readers know that Carter was responsible for none of her own success, explaining, "Ron has taken a floundering, uncertain actress and groomed her into a multifaceted performer who gets astonishing media coverage."[559] Samuels' powers stretched well beyond creating and protecting Wonder Woman, another article assures us, reminding readers that Samuels has performed similar services for clients including Bionic Woman Lindsay Wagner and Charlie's Angel Jaclyn Smith. Samuels excels in this role because he is adept at juggling "sensitive egos of his three TV ladies" and ensuring that no jealousy ("professional and sexual ") arises. [560] Coverage here and elsewhere presented Samuels as more than capable of keeping the new cadre of independent female heroes in check.

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[557] Ruth Rosen, World Split Open (New York, NY: Penguin, 2001) 306

[558] Leider

[559] Pat Sellers, "Lynda Carter's Marriage is No Svengali Trance," *Us* Vol IV, Iss 15, 11 Nov. 1980.

[560] Fleming

Despite the high ratings for the 1975 Wonder Woman pilot film, ABC programmer Fred Silverman, who had moved to the network from his post at CBS that same year, was hesitant to order it to series. ABC already featured the successful *Bionic Woman* (1976-1978), and Silverman was wary of overloading the channel with female-centered action-adventure programs.[561] In addition, *Get Christy Love* had failed in 1975 and ABC was hesitant about launching another female-led series.[562] For Silverman, the gender of *Wonder Woman*'s protagonist was its defining characteristic and would decide its ultimate fate.

Warner Bros. tried to sell CBS on the series, but NBC had a hold on the property until November 15, 1975 and CBS was unwilling to wait. Silverman, still tentatively testing audience interest, ordered two more episodes, both of which performed very well.[563] Yet Silverman still dragged his feet. Finally, NBC announced that they had arranged to pick up the series should ABC fail to exercise its option by November 15, 1976. Silverman continued to hedge his bets, suggesting that Warner Bros. provide him with six two-hour specials. Warner Bros., which was trying to become a force in TV production,[564] held fast to their desire for a series, and at last Silverman was spurred to order a full season of *Wonder Woman*.[565]

Even after making this commitment, however, Silverman refused to give the program a permanent spot in the prime-time line-up. Fred Silverman was considered a programming genius and *Wonder Woman* was now to become a tool in his latest innovative strategy. He ordered episodes of

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[561] "'Wonder' Wham Vs. Rivals, - But A Web Elusive," *Variety* Vol. 282 Iss. 13 5 May 1976; TV guide, iss 1244, n 5, 1/29/77 – 2/4/77

[562] Levine

[563] "3d 'Wonder Woman' Pilot," *Variety* Vol. 282, Iss. 2, 18 Feb 1976 and "TV Followup – Wonder Woman," *Variety* Vol. 252, Iss. 12, 28 Apr. 1976

[564] Dave Kaufman, "Warner's $1.5-Mil Stock Deal on Wolper Buy Ups Its Web Roster," *Variety* Vol. 284 Iss. 8, 29 Sept. 1976 pg. 53

[565] "NBC in Wings As ABC Options 'Wonder Woman,'" *Variety* Vol. 283 Iss. 3, 26 May 1976, pg. 59

various lengths, from 120 to 90 minutes, and kept the show off the regular schedule.[566] Instead of

offering the program a regular slot he used it to plug holes in the line-up, the only program on the network

to be used in this way. The two pilots ordered after CBS expressed interest, for instance, were slotted as

replacements for *The Bionic Woman* when that program went on hiatus after star Lindsay Wagner injured

her face during filming.[567]

In 1977, Warner Bros. became exasperated with Silverman's treatment of the show.[568] The ABC

programmer offered to buy 14 more hours of the program for a second season but refused to promise a

permanent spot on the schedule. ABC was dealing from a position of strength – Silverman had

successfully taken the station from third to first in the ratings. CBS, the ratings leader for the first half of

the decade, had suffered as the national mood turned against socially-relevant programs like *All in the*

Family and *M*A*S*H** and was desperate to claim some of ABC's audience, particularly the young

viewers who flocked to the network. *Wonder Woman* was perceived as a key element in claiming this

audience, and CBS offered Warner Bros. a guaranteed schedule spot as the leadoff program in Friday

prime time. Wonder Woman was on her way to a new network.[569]

CBS had ideas of their own about the nature of the program they were buying. They felt a more

contemporary setting might attract new viewers and moved the program to the present day, eliminating

most of the supporting cast in one fell swoop. With the Amazing Amazon now in residence in the 1970s,

viewers might reasonably have expected that the program would comment more directly on the women's

movement for which its chief character was an icon. On the contrary, CBS moved quickly to scrub the

show of even the fairly tame feminist messages of the ABC years. Lynda Carter recalls, "They were so

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[566] Bob Knight, "Silverman Readies Cross-Pollination," *Variety* Vol. 283 Iss. 11, 21 July 1976 pg. 48

[567] "TV Followup - Wonder Woman"

[568] Silverman did eventually give Wonder Woman a regular spot in the 1976-77 line-up, but only for a brief period.

[569] "Hud Grant's 7-Day Wonders of the Whirl in CBS Sked," *Variety* Vol. 287 Iss. 3, 25 May 1977 pg. 47

afraid of losing their audiences by over-feminist things… [the network] really didn't like [the messages], and they didn't think it was appropriate."[570] Diana's Amazon heritage was mentioned less and less and she very rarely returned to Paradise Island. Perhaps most strikingly, the lines of the catchy title tune were changed – no longer did the singer praise Wonder Woman for "fighting for your rights/ in your satin tights." Instead, the male singer crooned that the Amazon is fighting for "our rights." By the middle of the first season on CBS the lyrics would be eliminated entirely, replaced with an instrumental version of the song.

Wonder Woman inaugurated a small boom of superhero programs as CBS worked to tighten its grasp on the youth audience. An assortment of Marvel properties, most notably *The Incredible Hulk* (1977-1982)*,* began to find their way to television. Doug Cramer and his sometimes-partner Aaron Spelling considered producing TV movies based on Green Lantern, Thor, and Conan.[571] Comic-based projects were still understood largely in terms of the camp tradition *Batman* had inaugurated, a point made clear by another project Cramer considered, *Superman's Younger Brother*. The *Mork and Mindy*-esque comedy began when Superman moved his family from Krypton to Brooklyn and focused on his younger brother Billy, "a bit of a schlep." The project, described as "A super-hero version of *Get Smart*," did not progress beyond the concept stage.[572]

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[570] Mangels

[571] April 14, 1977 letter from Cindy Dunne to Aaron Spelling and Doug Cramer

[572] Susan Silverberg to Spelling, Cramer, Duke Vincent, Cindy Dunne, Lynne Loring, 13 June 1979, Douglas Cramer Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Over the course of the '70s, Marvel, like rival DC, made continual efforts to adapt to the

Women's Movement. Despite the Movement's clear impact on the comics released by the two major

publishers, neither Marvel or DC was eager to be seen as openly supporting anything as controversial as

feminism. Both DC publisher Jeanette Kahn and Marvel publisher Stan Lee stridently denied that the

Women's Movement had any direct influence on their comics. Kahn attempted to distance DC

superheroines like Power Girl, Supergirl, Black Canary, and even Wonder Woman away from the

Women's Movement, stating, "Our female heroes are full of compassion for humanity, not full of

rhetoric." Lee proved as politically elusive as always as he prevaricated, "You've got to be careful not to

hit readers on the head, but I try to put in what moral values I can. If it helps, even in comics, to show

women participating fully in the mainstream, that's great."[573] Ultimately, Marvel's efforts to appeal to

female readers were driven as much by the success of television's *Wonder Woman* and Marvel's own

cross-media efforts as they were by a desire to make their comics socially relevant.

Marvel's first ill-considered attempt to exploit the rising tide of feminism came in 1970.

Avengers #83 featured a story entitled "Come On In, The Revolution's Fine," which introduced readers to

the new, Norse-themed character Valkyrie. Valkyrie, the story explains, received her powers in a science

lab accident caused by male chauvinism and subsequently set out to bring the world's misogynists to heel.

In furtherance of this mission, she rallies the female members of the Avengers, promising they will,

"lose… the invisible SHACKLES which men have placed on you!" To convince the other heroes to join

her, the Valkyrie presents a litany of transgressions the male Avengers have perpetuated against their

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[573] Pamela Brandt, "Comic Books Seek Female Readers: The Savage She-Hulk is Born," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Aug. 1980, pg. f16

female colleagues, a list that serves as a fairly accurate assessment of Marvel's own treatment of female heroes. The female heroes, Valkyrie declares, receive less publicity, are part of fewer teams, and are often dismissed as little more than derivative versions of more popular male heroes. The new heroine successfully organizes the female Avengers into a team known none-too-subtly as the Liberators. With a cry of "Up against the wall male chauvinist pigs!,"[574] Valkyrie leads this team in an assault against the male Avengers, thoroughly defeating them.

In the comic's final pages, Valkyrie is revealed to be nothing more than an illusion perpetuated by the Enchantress, a perennial Thor villain and stereotypical femme fatale, who sought to use her creation to garner revenge on men everywhere after her boyfriend dumped her. In the end, the story depicts feminism as little more than petty revenge for perceived insults and presents Marvel's most powerful female characters as excitable and easily duped. Valkyrie, after multiple changes and redefinitions, remains a prominent character in the current Marvel Universe and will make her cinematic debut in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017). As for Marvel's attempt to adapt to an age of Women's Liberation, they could only improve.

Like many comic companies, Marvel had published comics directed at female readers in the past, but these had tended to be romance comics or other genres believed to hold a particular appeal for women readers. In 1972, Marvel made its first faltering attempt to create superheroes for a female audience. The company introduced three superheroine-led books; *Night Nurse*, *Shanna the She-Devil*, and *Claws of the Cat*. Roy Thomas explains that Lee came up with ideas and names for all three characters after deciding that, "he wanted to do some books that would have special appeal to girls."[575] None of the series lasted

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[574] Roy Thomas, "Come on in... the Revolution's Fine!" *Avengers* No. 83, Marvel Comics 1970

[575] "Roy Thomas Talks About Writing – and Editing – For Marvel During the 70s," *Alter Ego* 70, pg 49

beyond the fifth issue, although in typical comic fashion, all three characters found recurring roles in Marvel's sprawling mythology.

In the late '70s, Marvel introduced another group of super-powered women into their comics. The creation of these characters offers a unique perspective on the way Marvel's cross-media efforts shaped the company's comic-book-based fictional universe. In addition, it allows us insight into the degree to which Marvel's creators' understandings of the Women's Movement were filtered through its more pop-culture-friendly manifestations, including *Ms. Magazine* and the *Wonder Woman* television program. The success of that show inspired several Hollywood producers to attempt to capitalize on Wonder Woman's popularity by creating female superheroes. Fearing that a film or television producer might create a Spider-Woman character to capitalize on Spider-Man's success, Lee moved rapidly to ensure that Marvel retained the copyright to a female version of their most popular character. He hastily mandated the creation of Spider-Woman, who debuted in *Marvel Spotlight* #32, cover-dated February 1977. The following year, the character was given her own on-going book. Suddenly alert to the idea that producers might try to capitalize on the popularity of Marvel's characters by creating thinly-veiled female rip-offs, Lee also ordered the creation of a female version of the Hulk. The Hulk was in the midst of a successful television run, and Lee was desperate to avoid repeating the mistakes made by novelist Martin Caidin. Caidin had created The Six Million Dollar Man but had found himself cut out of the copyright loop when producers expanded that character's universe by creating a spin-off series, *The Bionic Woman*. Lee quickly co-created She-Hulk and wrote the first issue of her book, which debuted with a February 1980 cover-date. She-Hulk would be the last major Marvel character Lee would have a direct hand in creating. Explaining the impetus behind the birth of She-Hulk and Spider-Woman, Lee was disarmingly honest:

> I suddenly realized that some other company may quickly put out a book like that and claim they have the right to use the name, and I thought we'd better do it real fast to copyright the name. So we just batted one quickly, and that's exactly what happened. I wanted to protect the name,

because it's the type of thing [where] someone else might say, 'Hey, why don't we put out a Spider-Woman; they can't stop us.'[576]

Having launched She-Hulk and Spider-Woman on their comic-based careers, Lee and Marvel moved quickly to adapt them to other media. After all, they had been created in the first place because TV producers seemed desperate to find the next Wonder Woman. Marvel worked closely with DePatie-Freleng animation studio to launch the *Spider-Woman* TV series in 1979. Lee tried to follow up this success with a She-Hulk cartoon series. Proclaiming, "We know the formula works!" Lee sent a typically hyperbolic proposal to network executives. Making the motivation behind the proposed series explicit, Lee pitched, "Now, in an original yet completely commercial manner, we can repeat the Hulk's success formula with a new show, a new group of characters, and a new approach, while still keeping the same elements which have made 'The Incredible Hulk' one of the more durable hits of recent years." Anticipating producers' reluctance to greenlight a female-led series even in the shadow of *Wonder Woman*, Lee assured them that the series would also feature two male heroes, both "strong, macho, capable males" who could "provide a basis for male identification, so necessary to a show which is seeking to appeal to both male and female viewers."[577]

Lee would keep pushing for a She-Hulk feature for over a decade, and in 1991 it seemed the project might come to fruition. Producer Tamara Asseyev signed Brigitte Nielsen to play the part and arranged a glamorous fashion shoot in lieu of the usual test footage to pre-sell territories on the project. Nielsen's costume for the shoot, provided by Trash Lingerie of La Cienenga Blvd, gave some indication

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[576] Jim Dawson, "Hello, Culture Lovers," *The Comics Journal* No. 42, Oct. 1978

[577] Stan Lee, "The Savage She-Hulk: A Capsule Introduction," Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

that this was to be a very different project than Asseyev's earlier film *Norma Rae* (1979). *Jaws* screenwriter Carl Gottlieb teamed with Lee to develop a script but the project stalled.[578]

The circumstances behind the creation of another of Marvel's late '70s female heroes, Dazzler, offer perhaps the strangest example of the influence of cross-media efforts on the direction of Marvel's printed comics. The project was initiated by Marvel's in-house counsel and V.P. of business affairs Alice Donenfeld.[579] Donenfeld's idea was to create a comic character who would become not merely a star of film and television but a recording industry superstar as well. Marvel teamed up with Casablanca Records to create a disco-based heroine, the Disco Queen, who would receive a major multimedia push in comics, records, and, courtesy of Casablanca's newly established film division, movies. Donna Summers was initially attached to star, but the singer was quickly replaced by Bo Derek. The film project starring the character, now renamed Disco Dazzler, was set to be directed by Derek's husband John, but interest in the project quickly fizzled. As for the heroine's music career, disco was on its last legs and Casablanca was experiencing financial difficulties. Marvel's disco-centered cross-media efforts collapsed. The character remained in stasis until *Uncanny X-Men* #130, cover dated February 1980, when she made her debut bearing the name Dazzler. The following year the character would receive her own book, the first Marvel comic to be offered only to the direct market.

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[578] Andy Mangels, "Greatest Stories Never Told: She-Hulk," *Back Issue* No. 19, pg. 76

[579] Jim Shooter, "The Debut of the Dazzler," *JimShooter.com*, 4 July 2011 http://jimshooter.com/2011/07/debut-of-dazzler.html/

While Lee was in the process of co-creating She-Hulk and Spider Woman, Marvel's current Editor-in-Chief Gerry Conway approached him with the idea of creating yet another new character. Lee, preoccupied with the idea of creating female versions of the company's male heroes, suggested the creation of a character known as Ms. Marvel.[580] Ms. Marvel remains Marvel's most prominent non-mutant female hero and, in 2019, is slated to be the first female character to headline a standalone film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Conway, also the project's writer, made the choice to more fully integrate the new female hero into Marvel mythology by reviving and repurposing a character named Carol Danvers, created years earlier but left dormant for nearly a decade. Danvers had been introduced in 1968 as a supporting character for the alien superhero Captain Marvel. As security chief of Cape Kennedy, Danvers often found herself caught up in the Captain's adventures. One pivotal incident saw Danvers captured by the nefarious extraterrestrial Yon-Rogg and eventually trapped in the middle of a battle between that alien menace and Marvel. As Conway revived the character nearly a decade later he rewrote her history, revealing that during that battle, Danvers absorbed a portion of the atomic energy released by the two clashing titans and was imbued with super-powers. Danvers, now dubbed Ms. Marvel, donned a version of Captain Marvel's costume, albeit one modified to expose her back, midriff, and legs. It was hardly an auspicious start for the company's ostensibly feminist hero, receiving her powers from a male hero while serving as a damsel-in-distress and then adopting a persona and outfit derived from that of her male counterpart. What's more, later issues of Ms. Marvel's own series would reveal her derivative costume was the source of many of her superpowers, including her ability to fly. Ms. Marvel joined other female

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[580] Alex Boney, "Ms. Marvel: A Binary Life," *Back Issue* No. 54

superheroes like Supergirl, Batgirl, and Batwoman, who owed their identity to a man. Danvers career path is also troubling, as the future Ms. Marvel went from Chief of Security at Cape Kennedy to Security Advisor for the Defense Department to writer at a Women's magazine. We are reminded of Steinem's complaints regarding DC's treatment of Wonder Woman; in attempting to position the character as a feminist icon Marvel had robbed her of real power.

The first issue of *Ms. Marvel*, which debuted with a January 1977 cover date, glaringly illustrated the male-dominated nature of the comic industry's production process. The book featured only one woman on its creative team, colorist Marie Severin. Aware of this potentially problematic fact, the story was credited as being conceived, written & edited by Gerry Conway, but a surreptitious footnote adds, "with more than a little aid and abetment from Carla Conway." In an essay featured in the first issue, Conway argued that the lack of women working on the title was not his fault but that of the comic industry as a whole: "for whatever reason (right or wrong), at the moment there are no thoroughly trained and qualified women writers working in the super-hero comics field. (By making that statement I've alienated half a dozen talented women: but I stand by what I said – no women writers trained in *super-hero* comics.)"[581]

The inspiration behind Ms. Marvel's creation was made clear on the issue's third page, in a panel depicting a mother and daughter watching the hero battle a bevy of bank robbers. Conway ham-handedly positioned the character as a feminist role model as the young girl proclaimed, "Mommy, I've never seen a woman like that—have YOU?... Wow! When I grow up… I wanna be just like HER!" The startled mother can only muster a vague, "…!" in reply. Equally significant were the comments of another bystander, who, with jaw agape, declared, "I've seen TOUGH… But that little lady makes Lynda Carter

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[581] Gerry Conway, "This Woman, This Warrior!" *Ms. Marvel* 1, Marvel Comics 1977

look like Olive Oyl."[582] Ms. Marvel's feminism, the panel promised, was of the same, marketable type displayed by TV's Wonder Woman.

The next scene revealed the degree to which the relationship between Steinem, *Ms. Magazine*, and *Wonder Woman* was a driving force behind the creation of Marvel's newest hero. Carol Danvers is hired by publisher J. Jonah Jameson to edit a new magazine titled *Woman*. Spider-Man's perpetual nemesis Jameson is fed up with the content of the women's magazines he is currently publishing: "Articles on WOMEN'S LIB, interviews with KATE MILLET, stories about CAREERS FOR WOMEN—YECCH." Instead, the inveterate misogynist wants the magazine to, "have articles that are USEFUL----like NEW DIETS and FASHIONS and RECIPES. Things like that."[583] Carol quickly set her new employer straight: "as far as DIETS and RECIPES go—FORGET it," adding, "And one thing MORE, Jonah… my name is MS. Carol Danvers." Jonah ordered his new editor to make the first issue of *Woman* an expose of the city's newest superhero, Ms. Marvel. Sure enough, the cover of the magazine's first issue, depicted in *Ms. Marvel* #6, shows Ms. Marvel locked in combat with a rampaging robot.[584] The analogy to *Ms.* and its Wonder Woman adorned debut was not subtle. Steinem herself admitted never having read a Ms. Marvel comic, but quipped of the hero's powers, "As for super strength and a seventh sense, I think ordinary women have already had to develop those gifts."[585]

Carol attempted to balance her new job with her heroic exploits away from work, but the effort frequently overwhelmed her. The Carol Danvers and Ms. Marvel sides of her personality are separate,

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[582] "This Woman, This Warrior!"

[583] J. Jonah Jameson is generally a buffoonish but sympathetic character, and later writers toned down Jameson's misogyny, making his loathing for Mr. Marvel an ironic manifestation of his belief in gender equality. As he rages at Danvers for writing a positive article rather than a smear piece on the new superhero, he invokes more than a decade of loathing Spider-Man as he declares, "I'll treat [Ms. Marvel] like I treat ANY super-hero" (Ms. Marvel 6)

[584] Chris Claremont, "And Grotesk Shall Slay Thee!" Ms. Marvel #6, Marvel Comics 1977

[585] Brandt f16

barely aware of one another, and seemed incapable of cooperating. Danvers kept passing out from the strain of the dual identities, unable to recall the activities of the other half of her persona. She described frequent, "periods of DEPRESSION and UNEASINESS."[586] Marching towards a fight with the Scorpion, a confused Ms. Marvel pondered, "I'll need all my CONCENTRATION----and all my KREE-BORN SKILL!... "Kree Born"? But, I'm an EARTH woman…! Why did I think…" Moments later, the superhero avoided a trap, declaring "If I were anyone but who I AM, I'd be finished----but I AM who I am—" The echoes of Carol's seemingly confident cry of, "I AM who I am" reverberated through the villain's lair, confusing Danvers, exacerbating her shattered sense of herself, and leaving her vulnerable to the Scorpion's attacks. In the midst of the climactic battle, Danvers vented her rage at her irreconcilable identities, screaming, "I DON'T KNOW WHO I AM!"[587]

In his comments in the issue's paratext, Conway attempted to frame Carol's struggles with her two halves as empowering:

Now, if you'll think about that for a moment, you might see a parallel between *her* quest for identity, and the modern woman's quest for raised consciousness, for self-liberation, for identity. In a way, that's intentional. Ms. Marvel, because of her name if nothing else, is influenced, to a great extent, by the move toward women's liberation. She is *not* a Marvel Girl; she's a woman, not a Miss or a Mrs. – a Ms. Her own person. Herself.

But she doesn't know who she is….[588]

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[586] "Enigma of Fear"

[587] "This Woman, This Warrior!"

[588] "This Woman, This Warrior!"

Despite Conway's protestations, Danvers' inability to unite the two aspects of her identity carried troubling connotations. Male heroes like Superman and Batman were traditionally able to switch between their dual identities at will while Ms. Marvel's transformations were involuntary and debilitating. While the strain of spending time as a superhero caused personal and career difficulties for male heroes like Spider-Man, such characters were always aware of both aspects of their life and labored, often successfully, to achieve a balance between their daily life and alter ego. Danvers was unable even to understand her dual nature and the inability to balance her career with her life outside the office left her completely incapable of fulfilling her editorial duties. This aspect of the character conveyed a familiar "women-can't-have-it-all" message; feminists like Susan Faludi have identified such depictions of women unable to balance their professional and personal life as a common feature of '80s anti-feminist, "backlash" pop-culture such as the films *Baby Boom* (1987) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987).[589] This reading of Ms. Marvel is strengthened by the fact that the character's fragmented personality led her to frequent fainting spells, behavior linked to depictions of hysterical, unqualified women in pop culture.

Ms. Marvel's letters page became a space for fans and creators to debate the nature of feminism and the degree to which Ms. Marvel offered a powerful role model for women. Many readers were unimpressed by Ms. Marvel's feminist credentials. Reader Jana C. Hollingsworth, a prolific contributor to Marvel's letters page, opined,

> I'm willing to believe Gerry Conway really tried to create a feminist super-heroine, but his handling of MS. MARVEL demonstrates he has no idea what feminism is... I find it inconceivable that a writer could create Marvel's first male-based heroine and believe she was 'a genuine Ms.'… It's been proudly proclaimed that Ms. Marvel is not Marvel Girl; well, maybe the

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[589] Susan Faludi, Backlash, pg. 142

early Marvel Girl did have weak powers and an insipid personality, but at least her powers were

her powers and her personality was *her* personality.

Hollingsworth goes on to condemn the character's split personality, arguing, like Steinem, that robbing a heroine of her powers, even if only part of the time, was hardly feminist.[590] Debbie Lipp took issue with the slogan printed on the cover of each issue, "This female fights back!" arguing it was, "blatantly sexist, in that it implies that other females don't fight back - that it is, in fact, unusual and somewhat entertaining that a female should fight back." Lipp took issue with all of Marvel's attempts at creating female stars, explaining, "I object to man-hating Valkyries and Femizon Thundras as much as to wimpy Wasps and helpless Cleas [Doctor Strange's romantic interest]. A vow-taking Red Sonja is as bad as a forever fainting Sue Richards."[591] Fan Roger Klorese pointed to the exploitative nature of Ms. Marvel's costume, noting, "Any super-heroine who has to bare her naval isn't my type."[592]

Ms. Marvel, like Wonder Woman before her, underwent frequent, drastic changes as Marvel's largely male creative staff struggled with issues of feminism and the representation of powerful women. Only two issues after the character debuted, writer Gerry Conway was replaced by Chris Claremont, who had built a reputation for writing strong female characters in his time working on *The X-Men*. Claremont moved quickly to try and correct many of the problems with the character which fans had highlighted. In issue 3, a triumphant Danvers seemed to unite the two segments of her personality, proclaiming, "I'm—I'm not JUST Ms. Marvel, I'm CAROL DANVERS, as well. Two HALVES of the same person finally merging into a COMPLETE WHOLE. After all these months of searching, of AGONY—I KNOW WHO I AM!!"[593] Despite her momentary confidence, Carol's struggles with her two personalities continued,

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[590] Chris Claremont, "Bridge of No Return," *Ms. Marvel* No. 5, Marvel Comics 1977

[591] Chris Claremont, "The Last Sunset…?" *Ms. Marvel* No. 8, Marvel Comics 1977

[592] "And Grotesk Shall Slay Thee!"

[593] Chris Claremont, "The Lady's Not For Killing!" *Ms. Marvel* No. 3, Marvel Comics 1977

but the new creative team attempted to redefine them as a source of strength. In issue 7, the superhero discovered that her confused personality allows her to withstand attacks that would kill ordinary humans. Surviving a blast from the evil Modok, Carol mused that the only reason the villain's attack failed was "because Modok thought he was zapping ONE persona… and there are TWO of us."[594]

Issue 7 also began to move Ms. Marvel out from under the shadow of Captain Marvel. Danvers discovered that the powers once possessed by her suit have been transferred into her body: "Iron Man can KEEP the copyright on SUPER-POWERED COSTUME-ARMOR, Ms. Marvel's powers are HERS ALONE!"[595] In *Ms. Marvel* 19, the hero declared her independence from Captain Marvel, telling him, "All my life, I've fought to be my own woman. The last thing I wanted was to become a female copy of anyone – especially you."[596] In the following issue, this split was given a visual manifestation as Ms. Marvel donned a new costume that bears no similarities to that worn by the Captain. As Chris Claremont explained, the creative team needed to, "literally drive a crevasse between her and Captain Marvel so that she isn't created out of his lesser rib, to use a Biblical reference."[597] The separation of the two characters became complete in 1982 with the publication of *The Death of Captain Marvel*, which saw the original character shuffled off the mortal coil. Apart from occasional, brief resurrections, the hero has remained dead ever since, and in 2012 Danvers assumed the name Captain Marvel herself.

Though the Ms. Marvel series was cancelled with issue 23 in 1979, the character remained an active part of the Marvel universe as creators continued to demonstrate a profound confusion about how to depict her. Carol Danvers cycled through various identities over the years after 1977, spending a significant amount of time not merely as Ms. Marvel but as Binary, Warbird, and Captain Marvel. Comic

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[594] Chris Claremont, "Nightmare!" *Ms. Marvel* No. 7, Marvel Comics 1977

[595] "Nightmare!"

[596] Chris Claremont, "Mirror, Mirror!" *Ms. Marvel* No. 19, Marvel Comics 1978

[597] Boney

fanzine *Back Issue* compared the character to DC's Power Girl, but their description could encompass Wonder Woman as well: "Both characters… have been powered up and depowered frequently by male creators, and both have suffered extraordinary physical violations including rape and mysterious supernatural pregnancies."[598] The "physical violations" and "mysterious supernatural pregnancies" which *Back Issue* mentions are a reference to one of the most notorious storylines Marvel ever published. A series of 1980 *Avengers* comics depicted a villain named Marcus kidnapping, brainwashing, and impregnating Ms. Marvel with his own essence, forcing her to give birth to him. Danvers responds by choosing to leave the super team to live with her son and rapist. Within the fan community, the comic continues to serve as an example of creators' frequently egregious mishandling of female characters. Comic historian Carol A. Strickland, condemning Marcus' act of "rape and obvious rape at that," stated that the story showed "a collection of medieval minds at work."[599] In the years after 1980, as more female creators began to join the still overwhelmingly male comic industry, Marvel's handling of their most prominent non-mutant female hero gradually improved.

Marvel's attempts to position the character as a feminist icon continue to this day. When casting the role for the planned 2019 Captain Marvel film, the studio signed Brie Larson, an actress known for her outspoken feminism. In interviews, Larson has called the planned feature "a giant feminist film that can be a symbol for people,"[600] and explained, "I want to create this symbol of strength and humor for women that I really wish I had had growing up. It feels so valuable."[601]

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[598] Boney 22

[599] Carol A. Strickland, "The Rape of Ms. Marvel," *Carol A. Strickland*, http://carolastrickland.com/comics/msmarvel/index.html

[600] Andrea Mandell, "Brie Larson Campaigns For a Fight Scene Between Captain Marvel and The Hulk," *USA Today*, 8 Aug. 2017

[601] George Wales, "Brie Larson's Captain Marvel Will be a Feminist Role Model," *MTV.com*, 28 March 2017, http://www.mtv.co.uk/brie-larson/news/brie-larsons-captain-marvel-will-be-a-feminist-role-model

<u>Lee In the Wake of Wonder Woman</u>

The success of television's *Wonder Woman* proved a mixed blessing for Marvel's publishing wing, which wrestled with the character of Ms. Marvel throughout the late '70s and into the next decade. The program's popularity seemed to be a more positive development for Marvel's cross-media efforts as the entertainment industry experienced a brief blossoming of interest in comic book properties. Stan Lee viewed the Amazon's success with mixed emotions. Part of Lee's frustration with being unable to launch Marvel into the Hollywood firmament sprang from a sense that DC was enjoying cross-media success at Marvel's expense. Lee and others at Marvel believed that DC had found an audience largely by aping the style that Lee and his collaborators had innovated in the early '60s. In the mid-60s DC had attempted to latch onto Marvel's pop art popularity, altering several of their heroes to fit their imperfect understanding of Marvel's "hipness." In particular, they redefined Batman to emphasize the character's camp undertones, and it was this approach that caught the national zeitgeist and interested William Dozier and his colleagues in the property. Years later, reflecting on the 1978 Superman film, Lee would say,

> With 'Superman,' they made a lot of changes in the movie, because the movie had a flavor and a style that the comics never had. The movie had humor and a certain sophistication, which the comic book never had. 'Superman' was very dry as a comic book. The Marvel Comics were done in the style that the 'Superman' movie was done. Now, if we ever do a 'Spider-Man' movie correctly, it'll look as if we were copying 'Superman.' It's a funny thing. If they had done 'Superman' exactly as it was done in the comics, I think it would have bombed.

It seemed that the Marvel Revolution had made comics more appealing to Hollywood, but the company – and the man - who claimed authorship for the Revolution had yet to reap any of the benefits. Reflecting

on adaptations of comic book superheroes into other media, Lee was still lamenting "DC has done much better" well into the '90s.[602]

For Marvel, the main benefit of the success of *Wonder Woman* would come in a 1977 deal with Universal that saw the studio license twelve of the publisher's characters for development as television programs.[603] Universal's interest was not spurred by a fondness or even a familiarity with the comics – Frank Price, the new head of Universal Television, spotted the Incredible Hulk on his son's shirt and asked the boy who the big green man was. [604] Armed with this vague awareness that Marvel was popular with young people, Price signed a deal with the comic publisher to produce eight two-hour TV movies and, should those prove successful, spin-off series based on Marvel's heroes. [605] By the end of the decade this deal would result in the live-action Incredible Hulk television series as well as TV films based on Dr. Strange and Captain America.

In part, the Universal deal was born of desperation – the studio needed material that could be churned into TV movies. The number of made-for-television movies aired by the three networks had exploded over the course of the '70s, rising from 50 in 1970 to 120 in 1975.[606] Telefilm producers like Universal would turn anywhere for possible content ideas, even to comic books. The TV films were decidedly unsuccessful.

Marvel's heroes were finally being adapted into live-action media, but Lee was unhappy with his role in the adaptations. While Lee might be the only comic creator Hollywood knew, it didn't mean they

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[602] Sean Piccoll, "Marvel's Feathers Still Ruffled as 'Duck,' Other Films Bomb," *Washington Times*, 25 Oct. 1991

[603] Jim Galton to Stan Lee, Joe Giarraputo, 15 Dec. 1976, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[604] Howe

[605] "U-CBS Marvel Deal," *Variety* 6 Apr. 1977, pg. 87

[606] Gary Edgerton, Columbia History of Television, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)

had any particular respect for his creative abilities. He dutifully submitted comments regarding the story outline of each *Hulk* episode. Commenting on a proposed episode known as "The Hiding Place," Lee wrote, "I respect attempt to present a plot which slightly resembles Patricia Hearst situation. But, as it moves along, it gets rather obvious and unimaginative. As I've mentioned in the past, this seems to be another plot wherein the Hulk really isn't fighting a foe worthy of his power. It would be a perfectly proper plot for HARRY O. or for THE FUGITIVE."[607] The banality of the series was a particular sore point with Lee, a fact made plain in another memo that complained that a planned story's fourth act, "doesn't seem imaginative enough…none of [his] actions are particularly unique or representative enough of his incredible power."[608] Lamenting the sad state of the live-action Spider-Man series, which ran for two seasons on CBS, Lee said "I was supposedly the consultant, but they really didn't listen to me very much."[609] Elsewhere, he would elaborate, "Unfortunately, [Spider-Man producer Lee Siegel] and I do not see eye-to-eye on many, many things, and we've had a lot of arguments about the program, I haven't been happy with the new scripts I've read, but he feels they work in TV terms, so he isn't going to do the show the way I want him to."[610]

For Lee, the failure of Hollywood's attempts at comic-book adaptations was a failure of the collaborative process, and, echoing *The Monster Makers*, he once again pointed to the producer as the primary creative engine of an artistic endeavor:

> I don't know who should write the scripts. What's important is who's telling them *how* to those scripts should be written. The crucial factor is the initial guidance, and so far their objectives have been wrong. In Hollywood, they seem to feel there are only two choices: Either the shows

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[607] Memo for Robt. Harris, 5 Feb. 1978, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[608] Memo for Robt. Harris, 5 Feb. 1978, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[609] Howe 195

[610] Swires

have to be the same as every other routine adventure series, like The Six Million Dollar Man or The Bionic Woman, or they have to be 'campy' like Wonder Woman or the old Batman. I don't feel that's the case. I think they've blown a golden opportunity to create an entirely new type of program, one in which they wouldn't merely inject a comic-book character into the same old recycled plots. I'm very frustrated that I haven't been able to get that concept across to them.[611]

As the above statement indicates, Lee continued to find the film and television industry's association of comic properties with camp to be an insult to the medium, and he spent decades pushing back against it, albeit with his typical bonhomie. In part, Lee's constant integration of both social and character-based "realism" was intended as a counter to this tendency. Lee made this explicit in a proposal for a film intended to revive a star from another branch of the cheap fiction family, Buck Rogers. Lee opened the script by explaining, "This synopsis is an attempt to create out of 'Buck Rogers' a modern allegory… to transform a hero who has become a synonym for all that is 'campy' and gimmicky in science-fiction into a hero with relevance and meaning for our troubled times." The proposal piles on one "relevant issue" after another in an almost desperate attempted to ward off the aura of camp – pollution, computers, the military-industrial complex, the police, civil rights, over-population, out-of-control consumerism – with Lee carefully noting that each issue is "very much in the news today." The synopsis, another product of Lee's disinclination to assume a hard stance on explicitly political issues, offers a confusing, often contradictory satire. In the opening pages Rogers is chased by a mob of violent, out-of-control student protestors, but the film's primary antagonist, whether Ming the Merciless or, in a later version, the computer Spokesman, is a weapons-manufacturing member of the "military-industrial complex" whose "parallels to the U.S. leaders during the Vietnam war are obvious." The world of the

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[611] Swires

future is simultaneously an amoral libertarian bacchanal in which everything is permitted and a fascistic state ruled by computer overlords in which the population is kept in thrall by a perpetual phony war. [612]

Producers were largely unmoved by Lee's frequent suggestions that comic adaptations use social realism and a focus on character to avoid the stigma of camp. Instead, they battled comic characters' childish and camp connotations by forcing Marvel's properties into a familiar, formulaic prime-time adventure mold. Discussing *The Incredible Hulk*, Lee explained: "Universal didn't try to do a Marvel version. They said to themselves: 'We don't think it's going to work if we do it comic-book style. Therefore, we're going to do it like any other television show, so the adult viewing public will feel comfortable with it. It'll be a regular adventure series like *The Fugitive* or *Mannix*, and we'll simply drop the Hulk into it.'" [613]

Distorting Marvel's properties to fit the generic conventions of primetime action-adventure series was the order of the day in the late '70s, and a number of unproduced projects took a similar approach. A proposed Daredevil television series was to turn the blind superhero into a late-70s TV detective. Daredevil is given a plucky sixteen-year-old niece and a New York police officer sidekick who receives the bulk of the program's screen time. Each week, a new client at Daredevil's law firm presents the hero and his associates with a fresh case to solve. The pilot's script follows familiar beats as Daredevil tracks an organization extorting money from local business contractors. If a viewer were unfamiliar with the character's origins, there is little here to indicate that the show began as a comic book.[614] Daredevil's sometimes partner The Black Widow was also slated to star in her own crushingly mundane movie-of-

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[612] Stan Lee, Buck Rogers in the 25th Century, [undated], Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[613] Swires

[614] Stirling Silliphant, Daredevil, 1 July, 1982, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

the-week.[615] In a letter to the project's screenwriter Harlan Ellison, Lee made the derivative nature of the project abundantly clear: "I see THE BLACK WIDOW as a female version of James Bond, and the appeal would depend very much upon the appeal of Natasha herself, and the supporting characters. If you can create some Columbos, and Kojaks, and Rockfords for us, we'll have a hit."[616]

Marvel Publisher Lee and President Jim Galton were unhappy with the spate of late-70s live-action television projects based on Marvel properties. As the decade closed, they resolved to ensure that they could exert greater control over any future adaptations. The publisher grew determined to be at least associate producers on any future productions and committed not to "just license the properties to somebody else and let it go at that."[617] It would be in the field of animated television that Marvel would take its first dramatic steps to control its cross-media destiny.

Re-Tooned

The success of *Wonder Woman* not only helped Marvel bring live-action versions of the Hulk and Spider-Man to television, it also prompted the production of a flurry of animated series based on Marvel properties. In the near-decade since concerns about animated violence had driven Marvel's mid-60s cartoons off the air, not a single new frame of Marvel animation had been aired on Saturday morning TV. With the debut of *The New Fantastic Four* in 1978, Marvel restarted its halted efforts to become a presence in animated children's television. Ultimately, Marvel's late-70s cartoons would prove to hold

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[615] Alice G. Donenfeld, Vice President, Business Affairs, Marvel to Stan Lee, 8 April 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[616] Stan Lee to Harlan Ellison, 14 April 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[617] Swires

greater significance for the future of the publisher then their live-action counterparts, as a particularly fruitful relationship with the DePatie-Freleng animation studio eventually grew into something more. The studio had been founded by Friz Freleng, the legendary Warner Bros. animator whose diminutive size and fiery temper had served as the inspiration for Yosemite Sam, and David DePatie, the production executive in charge of Warner's Animation division in the waning days of its existence. In 1962, with moviegoing in decline, Warner Bros. made the decision to shutter their iconic animation unit, birthplace of Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig, and Daffy Duck. In response, Freleng and DePatie decided to open an independent animation company, and through DePatie's connections DePatie-Freleng was able to negotiate the use of a large portion of the former Warner Bros. Animation facilities, equipment, and personnel. Over the next several years the studio specialized in television animation and film credit sequences, finding the most success with a new character, The Pink Panther.[618]

Much of Lee's work in Hollywood centered around animated adaptations of works he had co-created, and he proved far more willing to be flexible with cartoon adaptations then he would with live-action film or television. 1979, for instance, saw the debut (and cancellation) of *Fred and Barney Meet The Thing*, which paired the Flintstones stars with one member of the Fantastic Four. One project that was not realized was a proposed animated TV special outlined by Lee, *Donny and Marie Meet Doctor Doom*. The story saw the Osmonds visiting Latveria, the nation ruled by the eponymous Doom, a land that has outlawed love: "Love is worthless, unproductive. Only power matters Love is for weaklings, for fools." Doom halts Donny and Marie's performance, but when a neighboring nation attacks he is unable to rally his armed forces because they are bereft of love of country. The Osmonds take the stage once more, teach the crowd the power of love, and Doom's newly energized military beats back the invaders. Doom, meanwhile "savors – perhaps for the very first time – the true reward that love can bestow" as he

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[618] Mark Arnold, Think Pink!: The Story of DePatie-Freleng, (Albany: BearManor Media, 2016)

falls in love with a beautiful actress.[619] It is one of the oddest outlines Lee ever produced, celebrating the power of love as an offensive weapon to be wielded by a dictatorial regime.

While Marvel's most frequent partner in animation production was DePatie-Freeling, other cartoon studios were also eager to partner with Marvel. Ruby-Spears Productions, the studio that birthed Scooby-Doo, proposed yet another series based on the X-Men, The Mighty Thor, and another spin on the Hulk formula, Teen-Hulk. This last project, written by former comic scribe Mark Evanier, was a satire that would introduce viewers to Chester Weems, described as "Woody Allen, rolled into one." When Weems shouts, "Help, Mommy," he becomes Teen-Hulk, "a seven-foot green baby."[620] For his part, Lee proposed a Bugs Bunny style cartoon based on the adventures of Howard the Duck to ABC.[621] None of these projects reached fruition.

Regardless of the spate of animated projects based on its properties, Marvel's future continued to look bleak. In 1978, Marvel President Jim Galton hired 27-year-old Jim Shooter as the publisher's new Editor-in-Chief. Shooter had begun writing comics for DC when he was 14 and joined Marvel as an assistant editor in 1976, rising quickly through the company's ranks during a tumultuous period when the publisher had six Editor-in-Chiefs in six years. Galton told the young man "Your job may be to preside over the demise of this business."[622] Marvel was saved in large part by a partnership with Hollywood, one that centered around the adaptation of a film into a comic book rather than a comic book into a film. In 1975, Lucasfilm's publicity supervisor approached Lee about producing a comic series based on an

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[619] Stan Lee, Donny and Marie Meet Doctor Doom, 4 Sept. 1978, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[620] Mark Evanier, Joe Ruby to Stan Lee, Outlines for X-Men, Teen-Hulk and The Mighty Thor, 26 Dec. 1979, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[621] Stan Lee, America's New Sweetheart – Howard the Duck, 18 Dec. 1979, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[622] Dan Raviv, Comic Wars, (New York: Broadway, 2002), pg 34

upcoming Sci-Fi film called *Star Wars*. Film adaptations usually didn't sell well, however, and Lee was not interested.[623] The publicity man turned instead to Roy Thomas, one of Lee's most trusted employees. Thomas saw the possibilities in the partnership and convinced Lee.[624] The series hit racks on April 12, 1977 and proved wildly successful, almost singlehandedly stabilizing Marvel's faltering finances. The publisher quickly got the greenlight to produce another series, and in 1978 Thomas and his collaborators developed a sequel to *Star Wars* years before *Empire Strikes Back* (1980) began filming. Drawing upon Lucas's use of Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), Marvel's creators borrowed the plot of another film by the Japanese director, plopping Han Solo and Chewbacca into the middle of *The Seven Samurai* (1954). Again, the series was a hit, and it soon became an on-going.[625]

Bolstered by the success of *Star Wars*, Marvel published a number of comics based on popular films; in 1979, such titles included *Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Trek*. Producers frequently turned to Marvel for help in promoting an upcoming film. As Lee explained to one hopeful producer, "The only films we are interested in are ones which we expect will become big hits and thereby compel our audience to buy the magazine because of the interest in the film… Of the many dozens of films which are proposed to us each year, we only publish a handful."[626] For major studios, however, Marvel was willing to go as far as altering editorial practices to meet the needs of their Hollywood partners. Roy Thomas related to Lee his decision to curtail the usually surprising honesty of the Marvel letters column: "I once had to chew out Tony Isabella for publishing a bunch of comments critical of two 'Apes' movies in PLANET

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[623] Garry Jenkins, <u>Empire Building</u>, (New York: Citadel Press, 1997), pg 81

[624] Dallas and Sacks

[625] Glen Greenberg, "How to do Star Wars the Marvel Way," *Back Issue* 9

[626] Stan Lee to Stephen Traxler, 25 Jan. 1977, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

OF THE APES #1, after some real trouble with 20ᵗʰ Century Fox."[627] No film-to-comic adaptation, however, enjoyed anything like the success of *Star Wars*.

By the dawn of the 1980s, the Wonder Woman moment was a distant memory. In February 1979, Wonder Women had lost her Friday leadoff spot to *The Incredible Hulk,* and the Amazing Amazon's series was cancelled shortly thereafter. The Hulk and his barely contained masculine rage proved a more appropriate figure for '80s America, a nation increasingly defined by a backlash against the women's movement and the social changes of the previous decade. With Wonder Woman's disappearance from television, TV and comic creators who had spent several years attempting to craft powerful female characters largely abandoned that project: the final issue of Ms. Marvel's solo series hit newsstands the same month that *Hulk* supplanted *Wonder Woman.* The next years would be defined by a collection of heavily-muscled, hyper-masculine heroes in the mold of Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo, who made his debut in 1982's *First Blood*.

With *Wonder Woman'*s cancellation, live-action TV producers turned their attention away from comic books: whatever the Hulk's strengths might be, exciting interest in other superhero IPs did not seem to be among them. Even as prime time television lost interest in comic book properties, the movie industry seemed primed to welcome Marvel's pantheon of heroes for the first time since Captain America became a film serial star in 1944. The proliferation of home video recorders and pay-cable channels had dramatically increased demand for feature films, and the success of *Star Wars* and other genre fare meant that filmmakers were willing to consider the sort of source material they would once have left to exploitation producers. Roy Thomas expressed the hope these developments brought to comic writers seeking to break into Hollywood in a letter to Lee announcing that he and Gerry Conway might soon have a deal to write a science-fiction horror film: "may God bless George Lucas and Ridley Scott and even

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[627] Roy Thomas to Stan Lee, 19 Oct. 1976, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

John ('Prophecy') Frankenheimer."[628] Thomas might have added *Superman* to this list: that film had opened in 1978 and set the box office alight. Yet despite these positive signs, the next decade would prove to be one of the most frustrating for Stan Lee as he sought to bring Marvel characters to the big screen. Marvel's adventures in the tumultuous landscape of '80s Hollywood would produce little beyond consternation and would result in deals that inhibited the publisher's cross-media efforts well into the '90s.

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[628] Roy Thomas to Stan Lee, [undated], Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Chapter 5

Lost in a Changing Hollywood

Lee made his first professional trip to Hollywood in 1966. In the pages of *The Fantastic Four*, he recounted his adventures with hyperbolic delight: "Didja hear about our big junket to Hollywood last November?... It was really a ball – and we still haven't been able to get the sunglasses or beret away from ol' Smiley!"[629] It was a love affair that would last for decades, and as the '80s dawned, Lee was preparing to take up permanent residence in Tinseltown. The Marvel Corporation itself was also growing more committed to the goal of moving into other media. An internal Marvel communication in 1979 announced,

> We feel it is vitally important that Marvel becomes recognized as a viable and functioning
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> producer of tv and movie properties, able to provide the necessary studio and production facilities
>
> as needed. Also, only by being on the scene, in our own environment, can we be certain of the
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> artistic and creative control which we feel we must have in order to insure keeping "the Marvel
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> flavor" in our properties.[630]

The '80s saw a number of developments in the film industry that seemed to bode well for Marvel's Hollywood efforts. The hunger for product occasioned by the rise of ancillary markets like home video and pay-cable television and changing attitudes towards genre material meant that, for the

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[629] "…And One Shall Save Him!"

[630] "Television and Feature Films," 18 July 1979, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

first time, film producers seriously considered adapting comic book material. From the perspective of 2017, it is clear that the '80s were a watershed moment in the history of comic book cinema. The developments rippling through the film industry during that period began a process that would, by the 21st century, reshape Hollywood into a landscape in which the comic industry, with its unique poetics and industrialized production process, could become one of the driving forces of popular culture.

In the '80s, however, Marvel's Hollywood dominance lay far in the future. Lingering ideas from an earlier era of filmmaking consigned Marvel and Lee to the fringes of Hollywood. Producers still looked to the sources of authorship who had dominated the industry since the collapse of the studio system – to stars, directors, and even writers – to sell blockbusters to audiences. It was not yet clear that characters and the universe they inhabited were sufficient to ensure the continued success of a major media franchise. Interest in Marvel's properties was limited to a new breed of independent producers who rose to prominence as the demand for film product increased dramatically in the first years of the decade. These producers, who often specialized in the production of exploitation fare, snapped up Marvel's properties. By the decade's end, Marvel itself was snapped up by the independent studio New World.

The Marvel film projects that did emerge in the '80s, both those that were actually produced and those which progressed no farther than the script stage, saw the publisher's characters forced to conform to action film tropes of the period. 1989's *Batman,* which featured a grim, violent hero brooding over a dystopian city, strengthened producers' understanding of superheroes as vigilante figures. As such, Marvel's bright, optimistic heroes, particularly Spider-Man, were made to conform to the archetypes of vigilante-focused films like *Batman* and the Death Wish series.

By the late '80s, Hollywood's landscape was changing dramatically once again. The excesses of blockbuster filmmaking combined with a 1987 financial crisis to cause turmoil throughout the film industry. The independent studios that had seemed so vital during the first half of the decade collapsed one after the other, dragging Marvel's precious IP licenses into the rubble with them. It would take nearly

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a decade for the publisher to dig the rights to its most valuable heroes out of the wreckage. Making matters worse, Marvel's first assimilation into a vertically-integrated media conglomerate ended in disaster. By the late '80s, a future in which Marvel ruled Hollywood seemed more of a pipe dream than ever before.

<u>Lee in La-La Land</u>

The success of Warner Bros.' 1978 *Superman* feature offered a clear signal to Marvel's executives that it was time to dramatically increase their efforts to adapt their heroes to other media. That year, the publisher took out a series of full page ads in *Variety* promoting their characters as ideal for film and television. Each week, readers of the trade journal were treated to a huge image of one of Marvel's stars accompanied by a pithy catch phrase. An image of recent creation Nova, The Human Rocket, for instance, appeared a headline blaring that he was, in fact, a "Human Rocket to Stardom!" Accompanying text boasted that Nova was "but one of over 100 exciting Marvel characters ready right now to star in motion picture or television productions."[631] Marvel's cross-media efforts were lent an extra urgency by the fact that comic publishing had ceased to be a profitable endeavor in 1979: Marvel and DC now survived on the strength of their merchandise sales – and, potentially, their ability to adapt their IPs into other media.[632]

While Marvel's rather desperate trade journal ads found few takers, Lee was reveling in his new West Coast life style. As he explained in a letter to Alain Resnais, "I LOVE Los Angeles. Joannie loves Los Angeles." In another letter, he assumed his customary self-deprecating tone as he gushes, "…I love

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[631] "Marvel Ad," *Variety* Vol. 381 Iss. 5, 16 May 1979

[632] Jean-Paul Gabillet 83

L.A.! Boy, all the phoniness and tackiness out there turns me on. I've found Nirvana! This is where I belong! To me, it's the real world—everything else is make-believe!"[633] His tone was similarly excessive as he announced the move to Marvel's comic readership, proclaiming, "mighty Marvel is getting so wrapped up in show biz that I've moved to Los Angeles for a while to set up our West Coast film production headquarters! It's been a real blast meeting and getting to know many actors, screen writers, and directors; but best of all has been the fun of introducing them to the wonderment of Marvel!"[634]

Lee spent his time in Hollywood meeting with various industry luminaries; potential deals surfaced and disappeared with shocking rapidity. An unpublished draft of a "Stan's Soap Box" from 1982 gives some idea of the many potential projects Lee was pursuing. The veteran comic creator explained that Marvel and various partners were in the process of developing, "SPIDER-MAN (Roger Corman Productions), THE X-MEN (Nelvana Productions), DR. STRANGE (Kings Road Productions), THE HUMAN TORCH (Columbia Pictures), POWER MAN (starring Carl Weathers, Apollo Creed of ROCKY fame), plus DAREDEVIL, THE DAZZLER, THE BLACK WIDOW and THE MIGHTY THOR—all four planned for prime-time tv!"[635]

None of these projects ever came to fruition, and Lee gradually grew frustrated with the fickleness of Hollywood deal-makers. He wrote to his perpetual confidant Resnais, "I'm learning (as you've always said) nothing is ever definite out here, and it takes forever to come to any agreement on anything between any two parties."[636] Lee was also unsatisfied with the long, uncertain development

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[633] Stan Lee to Stephen Lemberg, 26 May 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[634] Stan's Soapbox, Undated, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[635] Undated, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[636] Stan Lee to Alain Resnais, 9 April 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

process involved in television and film production. As he explained in 1987 to an interviewer inquiring as to whether he missed writing comics, Lee responded, "Mainly, I miss the immediacy, because in comics I'd get an idea for a book. I'd call an artist and in three months it was finished and I had it in my hands. In movies and in television, you can wait three years and still not have the finished product."[637]

<div align="center">Foreign Fans</div>

The producers who demonstrated the greatest interest in working with Lee continued to be those who hailed from outside the United States, citizens of nations that viewed comics with less disdain then America. Comics, like other forms of American pop culture, found a more broad-minded reception in post-war Europe than they had upon their initial release in America. It was partially this openness to American comics that resulted in the fandom of Lee's cherished Resnais and Fellini and in the interest of scholars like Umberto Eco. European comics had largely escaped the opprobrium heaped on their American counterparts during the Wertham era because their production was monitored by outside agencies – the Catholic Church in Belgium and the Ministry of Justice in France, for instance – to ensure they remained appropriate for consumption by children. As Jean-Paul Gabilliet argues, they were thus well positioned in the '60s to be simultaneously embraced by the Avant Garde and the middle class. In an echo of the French film critics who studied and celebrated a group of previously disparate low-budget B-movies as film noir, in 1967 the Musee des Arts Decoratifs honored a number of pre-war comics with an exhibition – though the Musee limited its scope to newspaper strips, illustrating that cultural distinctions between comic strips and books existed in Europe as well as America. During the same period, the

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[637] Mark Tompkins, "The Marvel-Ous Stan Lee," *Stanford Daily*, 3 June 1987, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

runaway success of the Asterix comics made the form far more acceptable to the French middle class than it ever became to the American.[638]

Lee eagerly anticipated similar attitudes coming to America, telling an interviewer, "Eventually, comics will be done the way they're done in Europe – in hardcover and sold in bookstores. If they're bad, people will say, 'I didn't like that one,' and if they're good, they'll receive as much attention as any other form of literary endeavor."[639] Elsewhere, Lee bemoaned the provincialism of his countrymen: "I think Europeans are more sophisticated than Americans, and when people are more sophisticated, they don't need to *prove* their sophistication. Your average American adult would be embarrassed to be seen reading a comic book. Americans are very image-conscious, and comics are an image. A European adult isn't that worried about his image, because he's more secure."[640] To support such arguments, Lee continually invoked the names of Resnais and Fellini.

It is not surprising, then, that Lee enjoyed a considerably warmer reception from foreign producers then he did from their domestic counterparts. When Brad Eichinger, head of Germany's Constantin films, shook Lee's hand in 1983, he claims to have physically wobbled, relating that the experience, "was like meeting God."[641] When British filmmakers David Barber and Christopher Wicking suggested a partnership with Marvel, their proposal demonstrated a fan's voluminous knowledge of Marvel by citing specific creators they would seek to emulate. Their proposed Conan film would draw on Roy Thomas's work with the character while a planned Ka-Zar movie would be based on the work of Gerry Conway or Doug Moench. Very unusually, they even proposed to have comic creators other than Lee write the screenplays for their proposed films, suggesting Steve Englehart write *Dr. Strange* or Jack

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[638] Gabilliet

[639] Weber

[640] Swires

[641] Robert Ito, "Fantastic Faux!" *Los Angeles Magazine*, 1 March 2005, pg 110

Kirby write *The Eternals*.[642] This proposal, which reflects a deep familiarity with the collaborative creative process at Marvel, was very much the exception.

In the mid '70s, Marvel had partnered with Japanese studio Toei to produce media based on one another's intellectual properties. Toei's producers were eager to move ahead as quickly as possible, and the incident provides a rare example of Lee putting the brakes on the production of a Marvel adaptation. After producing a successful Spider-Man series in 1978, Toei was keen to work with Marvel and Lee on other projects. Lee balked at the idea of a film based on the classic Japanese tale of the 47 Ronin, explaining, "there is one negative insofar as an American audience would be concerned. The story is totally downbeat. All of the good guys die – violently!… an American viewer would simply think it was all in vain."[643] Toei and Marvel did cooperate on a Dracula film based on the publisher's *Tomb of Dracula*, despite Lee's concern that the project was too dark and too religious. Lee felt the result "was uh, shall we say, uh… less than a, uh… classic?"[644] When Marvel's Japanese liaison Gene Pelc informed Lee it was completely true to the Marvel original, Lee replied "perhaps that's what was <u>wrong</u> with it! I suspect our story wasn't all that good."[645] Lee was continually disturbed by the speed with which his Japanese counterparts were moving: "What I'm trying to say is—I wish matters of this sort could be held off till Marvel has its studio—till I have an office, with a phone and a typewriter and a staff—till I can spend some time carefully considering the things you ask me—in other words, till I know what the hell I'm doing, where we're going, and who I'm supposed to be doing it with."[646]

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[642] David A. Barber to Mr. J. Galton, 19 Jan. 1977, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[643] Gene Pelc to Stan Lee, [undated], Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[644] Stan Lee to Gene Pelc, 19 Dec. 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[645] Stan Lee to Gene Pelc, [undated], Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[646] Stan Lee to Gene Pelc, 27 Mar. 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

As suggested by Lee's words to Gene Pelc, Marvel was, in fact, on the verge of acquiring its own studio. In 1980, Marvel's parent company Cadence Industries acquired the DePatie-Freleng animation studio and converted it into Marvel Productions, Ltd.[647] The acquisition of the studio came largely at Lee's urging, and was one of the final moments at which his input exerted a significant influence over the direction of the publisher.[648] An internal Marvel Newsletter ballyhooed the formation of "Marvel Productions Ltd., a television, motion picture, and animation studio," the birth of which, "augurs a golden future for Marvel, affording us total creative control of our celebrated roster of comic book characters and enabling us to lend our expertise to other television, feature film, and commercial producers anxious to cash in on the Marvel magic." [649] Marvel President Jim Galton stressed that the studio would negate the need for interactions with outside producers that either came to naught or produced banal material like the Marvel television programs of the late '70s. [650] Every project greenlit by the studio needed the approval of Lee, now creative director of Marvel Productions, Marvel president Jim Galton, and studio head David DePatie before it could enter production.[651] The new studio's first series, *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends*, debuted on NBC in 1981.

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[647] "New Marvel Prods. Glides into Ownership Biz with Swan Lake," *Variety* Vol. 299 Iss. 4, 28 May 1980, pg. 72

[648] Stuart Fischer, "A History of Marvel Productions, Ltd.," *Back Issue* 59

[649] Marvel Update, "Marvel Entertainment Group Forms Marvel Productions Ltd., A New Television, Motion Picture and Animation Studio," Summer 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[650] Marvel Update

[651] Jim Galton to David DePatie, 2 May 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Hollywood was experiencing dramatic changes in the 1980s as new media delivery pipelines created a pressing demand for fresh product, opening a space for a host of independent producers to attempt to enter the market. Jim Galton acknowledged this new hunger for media in his comments regarding the founding of Marvel Productions Ltd.: "With Cable and satellite operators joining the networks and syndicators in their demand for quality family-oriented programming, this is an opportune juncture for us to translate our publishing success to the broadcast media."[652] At the same moment, Hollywood was reconsidering the kind of films it was willing to produce, turning to genre fare and particularly sci-fi stories that had previously been the province of marginal b-movie producers like Roger Corman or American International Pictures' Samuel Z Arkoff. These shifts in the Hollywood landscape seemed to present ample opportunities for Lee and Marvel to finally gain a firm foothold in the film or television industry. Indeed, over the course of the '80s Hollywood studios would move forward with big-screen adaptation of Marvel's properties for the first time. Unfortunately, the resulting films would be cheap, shoddy affairs produced by the fast-talking opportunists who flocked to the fringe of the industry. Direct-to-video cheapies like *Captain America* (1990) and *The Punisher* (1989) would only serve to reinscribe comic books' place on the bottom of the cultural hierarchy. Making matters worse, the confusion and chaos of high-concept '80s Hollywood and Marvel's desperation for deals would combine to severely limit the publisher's ability to leverage their IPs over the course of the '90s.

In the mid-70s the proliferation of new technology altered the way Americans consumed media. In 1975, Sony brought the first affordable consumer videotape recorder to market. Two years later, JVC introduced the VHS format to the US via a deal with RCA, sparking a format war with Sony that would last well into the next decade. Sony had conceived of home video primarily as a means by which consumers could time-shift television programming, but Americans had different ideas - they also wanted

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[652] Marvel Update

the new technology to watch prerecorded tapes. The VHS format proved most adept at catering to this taste for prerecorded material, and by 1985 Sony had begun to phase out the bested Betamax format.

Home video was not the only new media pipeline which opened in the late '70s. In 1975, HBO, founded in 1972, began distributing content to cable systems via satellite, beaming the "Thrilla in Manilla" boxing match to cable systems around the country. Three years later, Viacom's Showtime followed HBO's example, beginning satellite transmission. Soon, other pay cable channels would emerge to compete with HBO, each one hungry for content to fill its schedule. Satellite broadcast movie channels penetrated the market rapidly, and by 1983, 39.3 percent of Americans subscribed to HBO.[653] Foreign markets began to grow as well; to compete with the VCR, throughout the early '80s European television stations began to dramatically increase the number of US feature films they scheduled. By the middle of the decade, studios were making more from ancillary markets – pay cable, home video - then they were from theatrical exhibition.[654]

The established Hollywood studios were openly hostile to the new medium of home video. This fact was amply illustrated by a lawsuit filed by a 1976 lawsuit filed by Universal and Disney alleging that Sony was guilty of copyright infringement for releasing a machine capable of recording the studios' films. Hollywood's initial displeasure with the video market was understandable. Studios saw no profit from video tape rental – the "first sale" doctrine guaranteed that they only made money off the initial sale to the buyer, who was free to rent out the video as they wished. Without the majors dominating the market, the five years following 1981 saw a golden era of independent video production and distribution, an era of, "new companies exploring new possibilities of film production and distribution, as well as developing a

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[653] Edgarton

[654] Stephen Prince, <u>A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electric Rainbow, 1980-1989</u> (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1999)

totally new approach in exhibition: the rental of videotapes."[655] New video distribution companies such as Media Home Entertainment and Family Home Entertainment (FHE) began to form in the late '70s and early '80s.

Video stores, increasingly a fixture of the American marketplace, were hungry for any product these independent distributors could provide. The major studios were scrambling for a way to control the rental business, and independent distributors offered store proprietors a means to escape their clutches. Vestron, FHE, and other young video distributors were eager to acquire any films or other recorded material available in order to feed video stores and increase their market share. Even after the major studios began to move aggressively into the home video market, demand remained high enough for several years to encourage an explosion of independently produced and distributed material.

One key genre for home video producers and distributors was children's programming. The innovator in this particular field was Noel Bloom, owner of a porn production and distribution studio. No genre was more popular in the early days of video then pornography, and Bloom reasoned that this was largely because it was a form of media consumers were reluctant to view in a theatre environment. Building on this insight, Bloom realized that most adult consumers would also be uninterested in viewing children's programming in theatres but might be very interested in purchasing it and using it to placate their children at home. Bloom became one of the first to distribute children's material on video, releasing it through his newly formed company FHE.[656] In 1985, Marvel was able to benefit from Bloom's insight. The publisher signed a licensing agreement with newly formed video distributor Prism to release the programs they had produced at Marvel Productions as well as some of the earlier Marvel-based cartoons

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[655] Frederick Wasser, <u>Veni, Vidi, Video</u>, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), pg 104

[656] Wasser

on VHS.[657] Prism was attempting to compete with star-driven tapes by emphasizing price. In a statement that did little to flatter Lee's co-creations, Prism's founder explained, "We'll continue to buy B product and treat it like cereal or cosmetics…. Today, $10 is a frivolous expense. I want People's, Thrifty's and Sav-On drugstores to say, 'At $9.95 this is a product I have to carry.'"[658]

Video stores and video distributors wanted feature-length films as well as cartoons, exercise videos, and other miscellaneous content, and a cadre of new producers emerged with the specific intention of feeding the appetite of home video. Among the most prominent of these companies were Carolco, Vestron, and Cannon. These companies built themselves on pre-selling material to the emerging home video and foreign markets. They thus guaranteed a stable source of cash for each film even as they limited profits. This pre-selling mentality would spread throughout the industry, eventually governing the activities of the major studios as well. The need to convince buyers of a project's desirability before a single frame of film had been shot made intellectual properties with a strong pre-existing audience all the more attractive. Between 1984 and 1988 Hollywood saw an explosion of films placed into production, an increase that was almost entirely a result of the proliferation of independent producers.

Manning the Cannon

On the one hand, this production expansion provided an opportunity for new, young filmmakers with a distinctive style to get their films released. These young creators included directors like Stephen Soderburgh, Jim Jarmusch, and the Coen Brothers. On the other hand, the hunger for content also

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[657] Tom Bierbaum, "Superheroes Head For Homevid Via Marvel Comics Video Library," *Variety* Vol. 319 Iss. 4, 22 May 1985

[658] Aljean Harmetz, "Studios Woo Cassette Mass Market,: *New York Times* 26 Jan. 1986, pg. C26

encouraged independent producers adept at creating exploitation fare. The two companies most responsible for the '85 boom were Cannon and future Marvel parent company New World, both of which fell into this latter category.[659] As Cannon's Menahem Golan bluntly phrased it, "Theatrical is not the only mouth to feed. If Hollywood produced five times as many films as it does now, it would still not meet the demand. There is space for the mediocre!"[660] It was this space for the mediocre that would prove to be crying out for Marvel IPs.

Hollywood B-movie producers had long had an interest in Marvel, which occupied the same marginal cultural space they did. In 1976, Samuel Gelfman, the Roger-Corman-affiliated producer of exploitation fare such as *Caged Heat* (1974), expressed interest in adapting Spider-Man to the big screen.[661] In the early '80s, Corman himself took out an option on Spider-Man and in 1982 Lee crafted an outline for the proposed project, entitled *Spider-Man: The Untold Story*. Lee's synopsis is absurdly extravagant for a B-film, reflecting the former editor's soaring ambitions far more than it reflected Corman's reputation for keeping budgets low. The synopsis culminated in a final battle between Doctor Octopus and Spider-Man on a UN building floating through the Manhattan sky after being levitated by an anti-gravity ray.[662]

In the mid-80s, exploitation producers Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, like Corman before them, became intrigued by the filmic possibilities of Marvel's IPs. In 1979, the pair had purchased the struggling Cannon Films, an independent producer responsible for a variety of exploitation films as well

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[659] Lawrence Cohn, "U.S. Film Distrib Releases Rise in '85," *Variety* Vol. 321 Iss. 10, 1 Jan 1986, pg. 3

[660] Wasser 123

[661] Stan Lee to Robert Lantz, 19 Oct. 1976, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[662] Stan Lee, Spider-Man: The Untold Story, 30 Sept. 1982, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

as the occasional more critically-acclaimed release like the 1970 feature *Joe*.[663] The two men were tireless pitchmen, selling a seemingly endless slate of planned pictures with shameless but engaging braggadocio, constantly hustling and thrusting and earning themselves the industry nickname the Go-Go Boys. Cannon, like many of the '80s independent producers, thrived on pre-selling films to ancillary markets, churning out cheap exploitation fare that had already paid for itself by the time it reached cinemas. Cannon found success by centering films around B-list actors like Chuck Norris and an aging Charles Bronson and churning out simplistic, jingoistic action hits like *Death Wish II* (1982) and *Missing in Action* (1984) along with a range of sex comedies, gruesome horror, and other less artistically oriented product.[664]

Golan and Globus had greater aspirations then simply filling ancillary markets with a constant torrent of lowbrow schlock. Cannon began to purchase and produce art-house fare that could be marketed to a sophisticated, upper- and middle-class audience. Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* (1987) was among the films that Cannon released in an attempt to move beyond its exploitation roots and compete with the major studios. The tactic was not a success, and the auteurist films the studio released fared almost as poorly with critics as their constant flow of Chuck Norris product.[665] Cannon's bifurcated approach to the market was not unknown among independent producers – in the '70s, Corman's New World had adopted similar tactics. By releasing the most unrepentantly lowbrow material alongside the most esoteric art-house and Avant Garde fare, this approach served to emphasize the cultural gulf between the two types of material.

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[663] Immediately prior to working with Lee, future Troma head Lloyd Kaufman cut his filmmaking teeth working on the production of Joe.

[664] Andrew Yule, Hollywood A Go-Go, (London: Sphere Books, 1987)

[665] Prince

Golan and Globus viewed Marvel's heroes as ideal material for conversion into exploitation product. Cannon began acquiring comic book properties in the mid-80s, after the major studios determined that the market for superhero films demonstrated by 1978's *Superman* had disappeared. Each Superman sequel found a smaller and smaller audience, and the 1984 bomb *Supergirl* seemed to mark a definitive end to the public's interest in costumed avengers. Golan and Globus felt that there was still money to be wrung from the Superman franchise, and in 1985 they acquired the rights to the property. Cannon's *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace* (1987) was a disaster, both aesthetically and financially.[666]

Before they licensed Superman, Golan and Globus had acquired the rights to several Marvel properties. In 1984, Cannon purchased the rights to Captain America for $225,000 and the following year paid the same amount for Spider-Man. The studio was Marvel's port of last resort; even with the new ancillary markets, few producers were interested in the characters the publisher was offering. Marvel's film agent at the time, Don Kopaloff, recalls, "You couldn't give them away… I would never have gone to [Cannon] as a first choice… I went to them after I couldn't get Captain America or Spider-Man sold."[667] Cannon's intentions for Marvel's heroes became clear as they attached directors to the proposed films. Captain America was given to Michael Winner, director of Cannon's Death Wish series. Spider-Man was assigned to Joseph Zito, the mastermind behind the Chuck Norris-starring Missing in Action films. [668] Stan Lee could at least content himself with the notion that Marvel's properties had been assigned to Cannon's two most veteran schlock directors.

Marvel quickly became familiar with Cannon's fast and loose business practices, as a 1987 lawsuit over the Captain America rights claimed Cannon never bothered to pay the publisher the agreed fees, ran ads in *Variety* without proper trademark and copyright notices, and failed to get the publisher's

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[666] Yule

[667] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 195

[668] "Cannon ad," *Variety*, 16 Oct. 1985

approval for the screenplay and costume used in the film.[669] Making matters worse, Cannon had credited Lee as Captain America's creator in the *Variety* ad. Captain America was one of the few Marvel characters Lee had had absolutely no hand in creating, and Kirby was incensed. In a letter to *Variety*, Kirby declared, "For the sake of historical accuracy, you and your readers may be interested to know the truth concerning the origin and creation of the Captain America characters." Kirby laid the blame for the misattribution squarely at the feet of his former creative partner: "It should not be necessary to point [the character's true origin] out, as Stan Lee himself is well aware that he had no part in the creation of "Captain America.""[670] Shortly after Cannon's faulty ad appeared, Kirby instructed his lawyers to move to reclaim copyrights for Spider-Man, the Hulk, and the Fantastic Four. In interviews following the kerfuffle, the artist reiterated and embellished the claims he had begun to make in the first years of the decade to sole authorship of the Marvel universe: "I saved Marvel's ass."[671]

Kirby was far from the only creator whose anger over being denied credit for their work was exacerbated by comic book film adaptations. In September 1975, provoked by news of a major Superman film, the aging and impoverished co-creator of Superman, Jerry Siegel, fired off a letter to every news outlet he could think of proclaiming,

> I, Jerry Siegel, the co-originator of SUPERMAN, put a curse on the SUPERMAN movie! I hope it super-bombs, I hope loyal SUPERMAN fans stay away from it in droves. I hope the whole world, becoming aware of the stench that surrounds SUPERMAN, will avoid the movie like a plague.

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[669] "Marvel Sues to Halt Cannon 'Captain' Use," Variety Vol. 326 Iss. 11, 8 Apr. 1987, pg. 7

[670] Jack Kirby, "Kirby and Simon, Not Stan Lee, Created Comic Hero Captain America," *Variety*, 24 June 1987

[671] Leonard Pitts, Jr., conducted in 1986 or 1987 for a book titled "Conversations With The Comic Book Creators". Posted on *The Kirby Effect: The Journal of the Jack Kirby Museum & Research Center.,* 1986/7 Jack Kirby Interview, Rand Hoppe, Kirby Museum, 8/6/2012 *http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/effect/2012/08/06/19867-kirby-interview/*

Why am I putting this curse on a movie based on my creation of SUPERMAN?

Because cartoonist Joe Shuster and I, who co-originated SUPERMAN together, will not get one cent from the Superman super-movie deal.[672]

The issue became a cause celebre within the comic community. Faced with consistent media pressure, DC eventually agreed to provide Siegel and his creative partner Joe Shuster with a pension, a bonus, and to pay their medical bills. Most importantly, they promised that every future appearance of Superman in any media would include the words, "Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster." The lack of creative credit was bad enough when it was confined to the marginal field of comics, but when it came to involve more mainstream, prestigious media like TV and film it became unbearable.

By 1987, Cannon, like many of the decade's new independent producers, was struggling. The company had expanded too rapidly and had, like much of Hollywood, spent far more than they could afford on star salaries. Cannon was particularly generous to Sylvester Stallone, whom Golan directed in the arm-wrestling epic *Over the Top* (1987). Golan and Globus hoped the picture would reap *Rocky*-style profits. It did not. By the end of the decade, the home video market had finally begun to cool – it was glutted with product, and increasingly a film had to be a theatrical hit to make money on video. The last act for Cannon began in 1987, as the SEC sued the struggling studio. The next year Cannon began liquidating its assets.

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[672] Best, 170

Golan had tried to make *Spider-Man* for three years. He had commissioned 10 different scripts, but as Cannon's collapse became more and more inevitable he was unable to secure financial backing. In 1988, Golan left Globus after an acrimonious falling out, taking the Spider-Man rights with him as part of his settlement. The producer formed a new company he dubbed 21st Century Films, but his ability to ballyhoo potential projects was unable to secure funding in a Hollywood environment that was rapidly becoming hostile to independent producers. Golan still had some skill at pre-selling, and in the early years of the new decade he divided up and sold off the rights for the proposed film: Viacom took worldwide television rights and Columbia purchased home video rights. Carolco spent 5 million for theatrical rights.[673]

Carolco was the flashiest of the '80s independents. It had been founded in 1976 but came into its own with the blockbuster success of 1982's *First Blood*. Where Cannon made do with stars like Charles Bronson and Chuck Norris, Carolco featured the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. Carolco produced a series of action-oriented hits into the early years of the '90s, creating box-office winners like *Total Recall* (1990), *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), and several more Rambo films. It seemed likely that *Spider-Man* would now become another of Carolco's big-budget, star-driven blockbusters – Schwarzenegger was interested, and James Cameron was on board to direct.[674]

But the video market was changing, and disaster loomed for the independents. In the mid-1980s, the major studios had finally fully plunged into the video pool. The wild success of the 1987 video release of *Top Gun* (1986) marked a dramatic shift in the video market. Home video became as much of

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[673] Ronald Grover, "Unraveling Spider-Man's Tangled Web," *Business Week*, 15 April 2002

[674] Peter Bart, "Carolco Girds For Crash Landing," *Variety* Vol. 348 Iss. 11, 5 Oct. 1992, pg 1

a hit-driven business as theatrical exhibition. To ensure high sales and consistent rentals, a film had to have reaped sizable rewards at the megaplex box office. To do that, films needed high-priced stars, directors, and enormous production budgets. Firms like Cannon and Carolco poured more and more money into their productions, careening towards disaster. If the game was blockbusters, the majors would always win.[675]

As with Cannon, pre-selling was a key component of Carolco's business strategy. Rather than pay overheard costs for permanent studio space or a full-time distribution network, the company produced only a limited number of films and distributed them domestically through partnerships with the major studios.[676] Any money saved by such practices, however, was rapidly poured back into star salaries and production expenses. Carolco quickly gained a reputation for wanton excess in budgeting and a general aura of decadence. Standing among the company's ruins in 1992, Peter Bart remembered the studio at its peak:

> In its heyday, the sheer mention of its name conjured up lavish bashes, press conferences staged aboard stately yachts, hot scripts being bought for mind-bending sums of money. Other companies made movies, Carolco only made megapics. Carolco never worried about runaway budgets; the budgets had already run away before the cameras started rolling.
>
> Carolco wasn't so much a film company as it was one great, unending party.[677]

Exacerbating matters even more, pre-selling meant that, no matter how much of a hit Carolco might make, their profits were limited, with prices having been negotiated before a film ever reached theatres. Carolco's model was unsustainable.

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[675] Wasser

[676] Prince

[677] Bart 1

With typically bad timing, Marvel boarded Carolco's yacht just at the moment it began taking on water. By 1989, Carolco was in trouble. Co-founder Andrew Vajna had left the company and his partner Mario Kassar was spending more and more on production – and on his own salary. The company's perceived excesses had earned it the ire of the entire industry, which blamed it for a commitment to excessive star salaries and escalating production budgets which were, in fact, a Hollywood-wide problem. The company's *Terminator 2* was a major hit, but the film was so heavily pre-sold that it barely benefitted the struggling studio. Carolco's third-quarter earnings report in 1991 revealed that they had lost $91 million in the last 9 months. It was at this fortuitous moment that Carolco acquired the rights to Spider-Man.

Lee's hopes of seeing his co-creations in blockbuster films had become catastrophically entangled in the chaos surrounding the death throes of the '80s independent studios. Golan was loudly proclaiming his continued control of the Spider-Man rights, a property he viewed as his ticket back into the big leagues of film production.[678] Cameron remained on board, but he couldn't direct until 1994, owing his own production company his next picture, and he wanted nothing to do with Golan in any case.[679] The planned price tag grew as Carolco's problems deepened – by the end of 1992, it was being touted in Hollywood as the most expensive production ever. Third party investors were assisting Carolco with financing and were ready to swoop in and fund the entire picture should the independent studio disappear entirely.[680]

To further confuse matters, a desperate new claimant entered the picture. No studio had fared worse in the late '70s and '80s than MGM – the grand old dame of Hollywood had been picked apart and sold off piece by piece by hotelier Kirk Kerkorian. In 1990 the remains had fallen into the hands of

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[678] Charles Fleming, "Golan Getting Back on the Go," Variety Vol. 346 Iss. 12, 6 April 1992 pg.5

[679] Bart 1

[680] Paul Noglows, "Comic Book Heroes Flex Megapic Mucsle," Variety Vol. 349 Iss. 6, 30 Nov. 1992, pg. 107

Italian financier Giancarlo Paretti. Paretti had been acquiring media properties for several years – in 1988 he had acquired Cannon Studios. He renamed his new acquisition Pathe Communications Corporation in anticipation of his impending purchase of the venerable French firm Pathe. The French government had other ideas, and found the financier's character questionable enough to nix the planned purchase. The move proved prescient, for by 1991 Paretti was facing severe financial and legal difficulties and his burgeoning media empire came under the control of Credit Lyonnais, a French bank that had been heavily involved in the Hollywood turmoil of the preceding decade. In 1993 MGM's desiccated corpse made a grab for Spider-Man. The studio claimed that the agreement that had allowed Golan to retain the rights in 1988 were fraudulent and they had, in fact, been included in Cannon's sale to Paretti that same year. MGM sued Golan, Viacom, and Marvel.

After years of antipathy towards Marvel's superheroes, in 1993 it seemed everyone wanted to make *Spider-Man*. The property had become a golden ticket to salvation, a means by which players like Golan, Carolco, and MGM could reclaim some of their rapidly fading glory. *Batman* (1989) had been the pinnacle of the blockbuster '80s that had birthed Cannon and Carolco, and here was a chance to recreate that success. When Golan received a copy of Cameron's script, he was appalled to find he was not credited as producer. He sued Carolco – and Viacom and Columbia. Viacom and Tristar, not to be outdone, countersued Golan, and included Marvel and Carolco as defendants for good measure. Carolco decided it wanted TV and video rights to their theoretical film and sued Viacom and Columbia as well.

Cameron's *Spider-Man* was a product of its times, bearing a closer resemblance to *Batman* and other '80s action films then it did with the comic created by Lee, Ditko, and their colleagues in 1962. The script outline opens with Spider-Man plugged into a scene straight out of the Batman mythos, as the hero perches atop a skyscraper and peers down at a sordid cityscape, brooding, "It all looks so... civilized... from up here, doesn't it? Like there's some kind of logic to it all. It's all so clear. But you get down there on the street and nothing's clear." This is Spider-Man reimagined as a creature of the night: "We explore the idea that the lure of the dark replaces fear of the dark… He feels at home in the dark, secure there… it

is a place he seeks for solace, for peace." Instead of a teenager struggling to fit into high school life, this Peter, "wears his isolation like a badge… with an air of superiority." His ostracization is less a product of adolescent awkwardness then a manifestation of his genius: "Our MTV culture frowns on people who think too much." [681] Peter's alienation from society is a strong running theme throughout the proposal, the result of both the villain's manipulations and the general moral degradation of the city.[682]

This overwhelming sense of isolation is heightened by a strong element of body horror that runs throughout the script. The "spider" aspect of Peter's secret identity is treated with unusual literalness, a recurring theme in attempts to adapt Spider-Man to the big screen during the 1980s – one of Cannon's early treatments of the property featured a hero who physically transformed into an actual spider. Parker's initial conversion into Spider-Man is horrific, "a David Lynch bio-horror montage of spiderworld," complete with "Glistening eyes in the dark. Sudden predatory lunges. Prey struggling hopelessly to escape." The hero's first serious romantic encounter with Mary Jane is accompanied by his running monologue regarding the mating rituals of spiders. In a theme that echoes the films of Tim Burton, Peter is tormented by the physical "freakishness" of his new body and particularly by the manifestation of web spinnerets in his wrist, the scriptment's replacement for the man-made web shooters the character had utilized since his creation in 1962.[683]

In its filth, omnipresent crime, and pervading sense of chaos, Spider-Man's hometown bears a striking resemblance to the degraded cityscapes that feature heavily in '80s action cinema, locations like the Death Wish series' New York, Robocop's Detroit, or Batman's Gotham. Spider-Man's Manhattan is, "a toilet of greed and dark passions." There are shades of the Death-Wish-style vigilante to this Spider-

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[681] James Cameron, Spider-Man scriptment, Drew's Script-O-Rama, http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/s/spider-man-scriptment.html

[682] Cameron

[683] Cameron

Man as, "he goes after crooks so single-mindedly and viciously that we fear for him… for what he is becoming. He seems to feed on it, going a little nuts." This is a superhero "alone in a moral wasteland, without a map or compass." Instead of quips, this Spider-Man spouts lines like, "If you worthless chunks of vomit show your faces around here again, I'll decorate my Christmas tree with your intestines."[684] Cameron's grim take on the usually lighthearted hero was not unique – over the course of his tortured development process, numerous producers, directors, and writers had understood Peter Parker in terms of the grim, humorless heroes who populated '80s action movies and, more specifically, as a vigilante in the tradition of Paul Kersey or fellow Marvel hero The Punisher. Albert Pyun, who Golan had attached to the project as director earlier in the decade, told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1988 that his Spider-man, "will be "a 'what if' film," dealing with 17-year-old Peter Parker, who becomes alienated after moving from the Midwest to New York. "If you were to follow his character arch [sic], he could eventually end up like Travis Bickle…."[685] Remarkably, Pyun links Marvel's quipping teenage hero to the most disturbed and violent filmic vigilante imaginable.

The villain of the piece is Electro, but Cameron has reimagined the character, transforming him from a working-class electric lineman into Carlton Strand, a ruthless corporate raider reveling in the deregulated Wall Street of Reagan's America, using his powers over electricity to eliminate rivals and manipulate the stock market: "Donald Trump meets Milken, mixed with homicidal psychosis." Strand's backstory is a virtual retelling of the Joker's from the 1989 *Batman*. Batman's Joker was originally a crook named Jack Napier who was set up by his criminal boss and pursued by police into a chemical factory where he fell into a vat of indeterminate sludge and became the Joker. Spider-Man's Electro was originally a crook named Carlton Strand who was set up by his criminal boss and pursued by police into a

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[684] Cameron

[685] Pat Broeske, "Those Mean Guys From the Comics," *Los Angeles Times* 11 Dec. 1988

lightning-catching "art installation" in the middle of the desert where he was electrocuted and became Electro. Cameron's script outline, once more following *Batman*, portrays Electro's death at the film's climax, an indication of just how little the planned film would reflect the seriality that defined comic book poetics.

As James Cameron labored on the treatment in the mid-90s, he sent several Christmas cards to Lee, enthusing, "what a thrilling prospect for the New Year and beyond to work with one of my great childhood idols on the film version of his greatest creation – Spidey."[686] And adding a handwritten note the following year enthusing, "Remember – Marvel Comics RULE… always have and always will!"[687] Despite Cameron's excitement over partnering with him, Lee seems to have had little input over the planned film. Cameron only sent him a copy of the treatment in 1993, well after it was completed.[688]

Lee also persisted in attempting to sell his own projects. Sensing the tenor of the time, he cranked out a variety of proposals intended to appeal to studios like Cannon, eager to fill videotapes with exploitation films. For one such project, Lee, never ashamed to borrow from the best, took generous amounts of inspiration from Roger Corman. The 1985 "Outline For a Motion Picture" known as *Decathlon 2020* shares more than a passing resemblance to New World's *Death Race 2000* (1975), released a decade earlier. Lee once again invokes a dystopian future in which, "The atomic Sword of Damocles hangs over our heads. We all feel as though we're living under a precarious armed truce, where Armageddon might break out at any moment." Violent crime is out of control. To fit the bloody tenor of the time, the most popular sport is Decathlon 2020, in which contestants fight to the death in a city evacuated to serve as a battleground. Blood is splattered, a world-ending plot is discovered, and romance is found. Inevitably, the film works on two levels, and this time Lee's familiar social realism

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[686] James Cameron to Stan Lee, Undated, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[687] James Cameron to Stan Lee, 1995, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[688] Jeff McLaughlin, ed. Stan Lee: Conversations (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) pg. xviii

comes in the form of a plea for unity between Cold War opponents. Even the most desperate of Hollywood's new independent producers was not interested.

A New World of Gods and Monsters

At the same time that Lee was dealing with Cannon and the other independent producers who had surged to prominence in the early '80s, a more senior exploitation maestro was setting in motion events which would ultimately have a profound impact on the fortunes of Marvel Comics. Roger Corman was perhaps the most prominent B-movie producer in Hollywood's history. In the '70s, four independent studios – Avco Embassy, Filmways, American International Pictures (AIP), and Corman's New World - concentrated on churning out the kind of cheap, youth-targeted exploitation material the major studios avoided.[689] His New World Pictures had dominated the drive-in, manufacturing efficiently produced and occasionally cleverly conceived films expertly suited to appeal to the taste of theatregoers to whom the major studios choose not to cater.

Corman was nothing if not a brilliant businessman, and by the late '70s it was clear to him that the market for independent films was changing dramatically. The new independents rushing into the field, companies like Cannon, were driven almost entirely by the rise of the ancillary markets. Theatrical box office was a secondary concern, a necessary step on the way to television and video but one that was increasingly dominated by the majors. In 1985, a year that saw an explosion of production from independents, 90% of the US box office went to the majors. This was in sharp contrast to Corman's heyday in the late '60s and early '70s, before the rise of the suburban multiplex and saturation booking,

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[689] Hy Hollinger, "New Tech Pumps Jump in Pic Fortunes," *Variety* 11 Jan. 1984, 11 Jan. 1984

when drive-ins and a struggling mainstream Hollywood left 25-30% of domestic box office to producers like New World.[690]

What's more, the major studios were increasingly eager to make the sort of films they had once left to Corman, out on the fringes of respectability. *Jaws* (1975) and, particularly, *Star Wars* (1977) had changed attitudes throughout Hollywood. Sci-fi, fantasy, and horror films were hot among the majors, and they were willing to pour far more cash into such productions then the famously thrifty Corman would or could. As the '80s dawned, the new landscape in Hollywood that looked so welcoming to Lee and Marvel held far less promise for Corman.[691]

In 1983 the cagey Corman sold New World to Hollywood lawyers Harry Evans Sloan and Lawrence L. Kuppin for $16,500,000. The new management team was ambitious, aiming to dramatically increase the number of films the studio produced and distributed from the dozen-per-year Corman had churned out. In line with the other new independents of the '80s, this was to be a star-driven studio. As one executive explained, "One of our major objectives will be to attract major theatrical motion picture talent who will make a broad spectrum of motion pictures with proper financial responsibility." [692] Sloan and Kuppin quickly made moves to shift the studio away from pure exploitation fare and closer to the mainstream of Hollywood, signing the agreements with Hollywood unions that Corman had avoided in order to keep production costs down.[693] New World stressed its dedication to controlling production costs, but was far more willing to pour money into their pictures than Corman ever had been.[694] While the studio still produced exploitation fare like the high-school hooker epic *Angel* (1984), they also greenlit

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[690] Lawrence Cohn, "Tough Going For Indie Distribs in '85," *Variety* Vol. 322 Iss. 6, 5 March 1986

[691] Wasser

[692] "Three Attorney's Buy Corman's New World For $16,500,000; Robert Burlage as Top Exec," *Variety* Vol. 309 Iss. 12, 19 Jan. 1983 pg. 5

[693] "New World to be a DGA Signatory," *Variety* 27 April 1983, 27 April 1983

[694] "New World Unveils 5 Feature Startups," *Variety* Vol. 311, Iss. 2, 11 May 1983 pg. 5

more mainstream releases like the John Carpenter produced, Ron Howard directed time-travel adventure *The Philadelphia Experiment* (1984).[695]

Sloan and Kuppin, however, had bigger plans. Key to their thinking were the emerging ancillary markets – as NWE president and CEO Roger Burlage elucidated, "The low-budget picture of the Corman era didn't have high ancillary values,… and New World embarked on a course to pursue modestly budgeted pics to improve theatrical performance and enhance the ancillary market."[696] Hollywood was in the grips of a wave of mergers and acquisitions, and New World was eager to take part. Before 1983 was over, the studio had expanded into television with the formation of New World Television. The new unit was designed to produce content for the three networks as well as the vital newcomers Showtime and HBO. NWTV signed exclusive deals with production companies headed by Gary Coleman, Linda Evans, Ron Howard, and Eric Estrada and began producing television programs including *Crime Story* (1986-1988) and *Sledge Hammer!* (1986-1988).[697] Not surprisingly, the independent studio also turned its attention to home video, forming its own home video distribution company by the end of 1984.[698] Demonstrating their dedication to the new medium, New World arranged for its first planned blockbuster *The Philadelphia Experiment* to debut on video only two months after its theatrical release, one of the fastest turnarounds for a major film up to that date.[699] New World's plan seemed to be working; Home

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[695] "New World Unveils 5 Feature Startups" 5; Ron Howard was no stranger to New World; Corman had given him his first shot at feature directing with the 1977 *Grand Theft Auto*.

[696] Richard Klein, "New World Set to go Public After Year of New Ownership," *Variety* Vol. 315 Iss. 10, 4 July 1984, pg. 4

[697] Jack Loftus, "Worldvision & New World Link in TV Production, Distrib Pact," *Variety* Vol. 313 Iss. 3, 16 Nov. 1983, pg. 29

[698] Tom Bierbaum, "Culberg Heads Supplier Subsid For New World," *Variety* Vol. 316 Iss. 10, 3 Oct. 1984, pg. 47

[699] "Another 'Experiment'," *Variety* Vol. 316 Iss. 6, 5 Sept. 1984 pg. 44

video and television deals allowed New World's profits to soar in 1985 despite weak theatrical releases.[700]

Next, the studio set their sights on animation. Marvel Productions, formerly DePatie-Freleng studio, seemed the perfect target. Since Lee had closed the deal for the studio, it had found a great deal of success producing Saturday morning cartoons like *Muppet Babies* (1984-1991), *Transformers* (1984-1987), and *G.I.Joe* (1983-1986). On November 26, 1986, New World acquired Marvel for $50 million.[701] The studio was more interested in using the company's animation studio to enter the children's cartoon market then it was in the big screen potential of its comic book superheroes. After the Marvel purchase, NWE co-chairman Lawence Kuppin proclaimed, "We instantly become an important player in the animation area."[702] New World's owners were no more fans of Marvel's comics then most Hollywood management teams and had no knowledge of or interest in being in the comic publishing business. As the purchase was finalized, president Bob Rehme was tremendously excited that the company was purchasing Superman. When he learned that Marvel featured a different pantheon entirely, he attempted to halt the sale – not only was Spider-Man less popular, but Cannon controlled his film rights.[703]

Despite their marginal exploitation lineage and focus on licensing, NWE still saw comic property film adaptations as beneath them. William Rabkin, who evaluated scripts for the company, explains, "They tended to look down on the titles, gravitating toward projects that made fun of the medium." Television's *Batman*, it seems, remained the dominant point of reference for studio executives. Like Cannon, New World saw superhero films as the cheapest sort of exploitation fare – Rehme asked Rabkin

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[700] "New World Profits Soar For First Half," *Variety* Vol. 324 Iss. 3, 13 Aug. 1986, pg. 3

[701] Richard Klein, "New World Buys Marvel Comics, Becomes Prominent in Animation," *Variety* Vol. 325 Iss. 5, 26 Nov. 1986, pg. 4

[702] "New World Buys Marvel Comics, Becomes Prominent in Animation" 4

[703] Howe 295

for a list of properties that could be shot cheaply in South America, a technique exploitation producers like Corman had used to profitable ends for genres like the '70s "women-in-prison" films. Working to this brief Rabkin wrote a *Blade* screenplay, following the adventures of Marvel's vampire hunter in Mexico. Richard Roundtree briefly expressed interest, but the project floundered.[704]

Stan Lee's name was nowhere to be found in New World's effusive press release. Still, Lee was delighted by the development. If Marvel was able to keep more of the production process in-house, Lee reasoned, he would have a greater opportunity to exert genuine creative control. Shortly after the New World purchase, an interviewer asked Lee how involved he was in the filmmaking process: "As much as possible… I'm involved in all the movies we're doing. I meet with the artists, and I have a feeling I'm going to be more and more involved as time goes along. It's incredibly exciting, the fact that we were bought by New World. It's the best thing that could have happened to us."[705] Lee had grown increasingly frustrated with his inability to influence the producers to whom Marvel licensed their properties. Outside projects like the Spider-Man television series and Cannon's *Captain America* film enlisted Lee as a consultant but promptly dismissed his suggestions – the only value he offered them was the authorizing function of his name in the credits. Lee hoped New World would be different, and he happily mounted his Soapbox in the pages of Marvel comics once more to announce:

> The young, hip, fun-loving guys who run New World dig Marvel Comics as much as you do!
> That's why they bought us! They want to make some real dynamite movies and TV shows based
> on all your favorite characters… I don't wanna sound like I'm trying to snow you, so I'll just

[704] Howe

[705] Tompkins

mention two of their latest smashes – the movie Soul Man and the TV series Sledge Hammer. 'Nuff said?'[706]

Lee was destined to be disappointed once again. During the less than three-year long period during which New World owned Marvel, Lee's most prominent role was as the officiant in a giant mock wedding the studio staged between Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson in Shea Stadium. Despite his new boss's disinterest, however, Lee persevered in pitching ideas. He managed to get Rehme to greenlight an Ant-Man film based largely on the success of Disney's *Honey I Shrunk the Kids* (1989), but New World collapsed before the film could move forward. Otherwise, Lee had little luck in pitching projects to Marvel's new owners; he was now in his '60s, and his avuncular charm and desperation to be liked made him easy for showbiz lawyers steeped in the hard-charging competition of 1980s Hollywood like Sloane, Kuppin, and Rehme to dismiss. They were far more likely to listen to the aggressive NYU Law graduate Joe Calimari who now became Marvel's Hollywood point man. Lee was never one to be deterred, however. One New Line executive lamented, "Stan's not in the loop, because he's not a player; he's not a partner. He wasn't a vote. But he was like a pit bull. He just didn't want to walk away."[707]

While New World initially promised not to interfere with any existing efforts to adapt Marvel properties, events quickly belied such pledges. By early 1988 Cannon was suing New World for allegedly blocking their ability to produce a Spider-Man film. Key to the lawsuit was Cannon's charge that Marvel's new ownership was preventing Lee from cooperating on the project despite the fact that the studio had specifically paid for his consultation. Cannon sought a court order preventing New World

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[706] Howe 295

[707] Howe 313

from interfering with Lee's involvement. [708] The complaint makes clear how central both Marvel and Cannon understood Lee's authorizing role to be.

Shortly after the Marvel acquisition, New World's head of production Bob Rehme wrote an article for *Variety* crowing over independent producers' "flexibility," their key advantage over the majors. The mainstream studios, Rehme wrote, play it safe, spending millions to acquire properties in the attempt to find one that is a surefire blockbuster. New World and its ilk, however, produced films that are, "fresh, different, creative, ingenious and totally, wonderfully unexpected."[709] Looking at the article from an era awash in comic book cinema, these seem like odd sentiments coming from the executive of a company that had just acquired one of the largest slates of superhero IPs in the world. For Rehme, however, Marvel's heroes weren't blockbuster material, but rather fringe-dwelling fodder for a studio built on producing cheaper films for a more specialized audience. After all, indies, "can deal with subjects which appeal to unique segments of the audience"[710] – an approach appropriate to characters still well outside of the mainstream consciousness.

Having acquired Marvel, New World next set its sight on purchasing a toy manufacturer, in large part out of a desire to leverage its new superheroes. In July 1987, the studio made an offer of close to $400 million for Kenner Parker Toys.[711] But New World's feeding frenzy was drawing to a close. New World's first ads for Marvel, featuring an action-ready Spider-Man and the text "New World Television presents your all-time favorite superheroes… now together for the first time," appeared in the same issue of Variety as a story documenting the studio's disastrous financial situation following the October 19, 1987 stock market crash. The crash hit the entertainment industry particularly hard and independent

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[708] "Cannon Files Suit Vs. New World For Blocking Spiderman," *Variety* Vol. 330 Iss. 12, 13 Apr. 1988, pg 4

[709] Bob Rehme, "Indie Strength Lies in Flexibility, Not Muscle," Variety Vol. 325 Iss. 12, 14 Jan. 1987, pg. 10

[710] Rehme

[711] "NW Courts Merger with Kenner Toys For $350-400 Mil," Variety Vol. 327 Iss. 13, 22 July 1987, pg. 3

producers who only a few years earlier had flooded the market with product now found themselves in severe financial trouble. New World's stock fell almost 68% during October. The independent producers – and Wall Street – had exaggerated the opportunities offered by ancillary media markets. [712] New World had radically increased its overhead by acquiring new subsidiaries, and sources of money were rapidly drying up. Existing funding partnerships collapsed.[713] New World was unable to pay Cadence the outstanding balance on the Marvel purchase.[714] By April of 1988, New World had begun selling off the facilities it had acquired only months before.[715]

Bob Rehme returned to the pages of *Variety* to try to staunch the bleeding. In the process, he illuminated how attitudes towards media storyworlds and cross-media content differed between 1988 and the 21st century heyday of comic book cinema. Decrying other indies like Cannon and Vestron that had focused too much on the video market, Rehme bolstered his own company's strategy: "Diversification, as at New World, is essential so that a company is not dependent on any one stream of revenue. Areas of investment can include theatrical film, television, video, publishing, children's programming/animation, licensing and merchandising."[716] Rehme's attitude towards "diversification" is striking; unlike the 21st century studios, Rehme portrays the utilization of multiple pipelines as a way to minimize risk rather than as a way to increase loyalty to a property by arranging to have each pipeline reinforce the others. NWE was going to nearly double production budgets, Rehme continued, in order to attract the sort of creators necessary to make their films a theatrical success. Rehme, like most of Hollywood, was still focused on

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[712] "Program Stocks Head South," *Variety* Vol. 329 Iss. 2, 4 Nov. 1987, pg. 38

[713] Tom Girard, "Impact of Wall St.'s Egg Laying Leaves Some Cock-Of-The-Walks Looking Like Plucked Chickens," *Variety* Vol. 329 Iss. 11, 6 Jan. 1988, pg. 5

[714] "Cadence Trustees Seek Marvel Pay," *Variety* Vol. 329 Iss. 9, 23 Dec. 1987, pg. 3

[715] "New World To Sell Lions Gate Studios, Exit TV 'Highway'," *Variety* Vol 331 Iss. 1, 27 April 1988, pg. 5

[716] Bob Rehme, "Indies Must Map Out Strategies To Fit Changing Domestic Markets," *Variety* Vol. 329 Iss. 13, 20 Jan. 1988, pg. 8

big, creative names – stars, directors, producers – as the necessary element in linking a media empire's pipelines and maximizing profit. He did not consider the possibilities of relying upon storyworlds to encourage audience devotion and consumption.

By 1988, New World was looking to sell Marvel, and in November of that year the studio announced the acquisition of Marvel Comics by Ronald O. Perelman's Andrews Group for $82,500,000.[717] For the time being NWE retained the animation studio, but a few months later Perelman would buy New World lock, stock, and barrel for $145,000,000.[718] In the end, New World had merely found a slightly different way to overextend then Cannon, Carolco, and the other 80's independent producers.

Ultimately, the Marvel acquisition had contributed to New World's collapse in several ways. Like the studio's other purchases, it had increased the studio's overhead and drained their pool of ready cash, leaving them exposed. More importantly, NWE had acquired Marvel largely for the purpose of entering the children's animation marketplace, but by '87 that field was overcrowded and profits were very difficult to come by.[719] New World was laid low in part by an assumption that had dogged Lee and Marvel for years – the conviction that comics held no appeal beyond a young audience.

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[717] "New World to Sell Two Marvel Units," *Variety* Vol. 333 Iss. 3, 9 Nov. 1988, pg. 8

[718] New World – minus Marvel – would be purchased by Rupert Murdoch in 1996

[719] Morrie Gelman, "TV Industry Plays it as it Lays Off," Variety Vol. 330 Iss. 1, 27 Jan. 1988 pg. 37

Marvel's first incorporation into a vertically-integrated media conglomerate lasted just a little over two years. The sole cinematic fruit of the marriage was the 1989 Dolph Lundgren-starring *Punisher*, which began shooting well after it was clear Marvel's association with the studio was doomed. It is entirely unsurprising that The Punisher was the first of Marvel's post-war heroes to find his way to film.[720] He was both the least fantastic of Marvel's major players and one who had been vaulted to fame by the same cultural mood that was driving many of Hollywood's action blockbuster. The Punisher is Frank Castle, a Vietnam vet who saw his entire family gunned down by the mafia and embarked on a one-man mission to murder every criminal who came within his gun sights. Though the character was not inspired by Paul Kersey – he was patterned on the character of The Executioner, another Vietnam-vet-turned-vigilante who starred in a series of cheap novels - he underwent a media transformation similar to that experienced by the Death Wish protagonist.[721] Castle debuted in 1974, two years after Brian Garfield's *Death Wish* (1972) novel introduced readers to Kersey. Neither Kersey and Castle were originally intended as figures worthy of admiration or emulation. The Punisher was, at best, a sympathetic villain, manipulated by a criminal to hunt down and kill Spider-Man while Kersey was a man so blinded by grief that he abandoned his principles and became a killer.

Several months after The Punisher debuted, the first Death Wish film premiered. In the Paramount-produced feature, there is far less equivocation regarding the righteousness of Kersey and his

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[721] Brian Cronin, "Comic Legends Revealed #567," *Comic Book Resource*, 18 March 2016, http://www.cbr.com/comic-book-legends-revealed-567/

vigilantism then in the original novel. In the years following 1974, The Punisher was embraced by comic readers with an enthusiasm that shocked his creators. As racially-driven fears about inner-city crime increased, both Kersey and Castle saw their popularity grow. In 1982 *Death Wish 2* hit theatres. This new film was produced by Cannon, a studio not known for the nuance of their narratives. In 1986, The Punisher received his own mini-series, followed quickly by an ongoing series. In both film and comic, the vigilante is celebrated unreservedly, his opponents depicted as simplistically as possible. The works featuring Kersey and Castle now reflected an increasingly prevalent view that criminals were inherently evil, that rehabilitation was futile, and that cities had become both morally and physically decayed.[722] In 1988, Marvel editor and *Punisher* writer Carl Potts made clear to an interviewer that Frank Castle was channeling the age of his presumably male viewers: "He's doing what the reader wishes he could do. He's fighting back."[723]

The Punisher film was pitched by NYU graduate Boaz Yakin to a puzzled New World executive – Yakin recalls "They had never even heard of [The Punisher]. No one was making comic book movies at the time."[724] New World's executives had, however, heard of *Death Wish* and the many vigilante-based action films that followed in its wake, and those made money. The film was released in October 1989, the month before Perelman purchased Marvel from New World. Although it received an international theatrical release, in America the film went direct to video. The '80s would close without a single one of Marvel's post-war superheroes reaching US cinemas.

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[722] Anne-Marie Cusac, Cruel and Unusual, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) pg 170

[723] Broeske

[724] Fred Topel, "Action Packed: Boaz Yakin on Safe and Batman Beyond," *Crave*, 23 Apr. 2012 http://www.craveonline.com/site/187255-action-packed-boaz-yakin-on-safe-and-batman-beyond

The Gospel According to Lee

In 1986, a Marvel property hit the big screen for the first time, albeit not one starring a superhero. The picture had an impressive pedigree – it was produced by George Lucas, the man who had played a key role in turning Hollywood's attention to genre fare. The film, *Howard the Duck*, became one of the most legendary bombs in Hollywood history. Lee discussed the disaster with his usual jollity from atop his Soapbox, now relocated to the pages of a Marvel-published fan-magazine called *Marvel Age*: "We've also got some new feature-length films winging your way! I mean, you didn't expect us to just rest on our laurels after our world-famous HOWARD THE DUCK megahit, didja? Y'know, it's a funny thing about ol' Howie. If the flick had been a success, I'd have found some way for Marvel to claim credit for it. I mean, you know me! But, since it faded away like a thief in the night, I've been working overtime looking for someone to blame."[725] Lee would soon decide that the blame lay squarely with Hollywood's producers.

In the wake *Howard the Duck*, Lee wrote his fullest consideration of comic-to-film adaptations, an unpublished article composed sometime in late 1986 or early 1987. Lee understood the potential for comic book characters in the new, high-concept Hollywood, explaining comic "characters themselves are usually presold to audiences around the world."[726] He went on to expound on why producers, hungry for material, might be drawn to comic book material, but sounded a cautionary note:

> At first blush, it all seems so obvious. In format, comicstrips are basically similar to movies, right? Right. They're high concept, extremely visual, have sparse dialogue and, most

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[725] Stan Lee, "Stan's Soapbox," *Marvel Age* 49, Marvel Comics 1987

[726] Stan Lee, "Bam! Pow! Bang! From Comicbooks to Cinema," Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

important of all, appeal to young audiences, right? Right. So nothing could be simpler than to take popular comicbook heroes or heroines and transform them into cinematic megahits, right?

Wrong![727]

For Lee, the problem lay in the lack of respect that Hollywood producers demonstrated towards the comic book material they adapted, the same attitude that had been frustrating Lee's attempts to enter Hollywood for years:

> [Comic adaptations] must be handled carefully, sensitively, skillfully. Their characterizations must be sharply honed, their motivations must be rational and understandable, their fantasy world, though having its own rules, must adhere to those rules and not bend them for the convenience of the writer. In short, the same intelligence and respect for your audience must be shown in comicbook-based films as in any other type of movie.[728]

The film that weighed most heavily on Lee's analysis, of course, was *Howard the Duck*. He explained that the comic had succeeded based on its sharp social commentary and that the film version, "should have been an outrageous comedy with the emphasis on satire, featuring the observations of an Everyman from another world, rather than a big budget spectacle with fantastic special effects which totally overlooked the prime reason for his original popularity."[729] He neglected to mention that, some years earlier, he had proposed a Howard the Duck cartoon to ABC that replaced the satire with Warner-Brothers-cartoon inspired slapstick.[730]

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[727] "Bam! Pow! Bang! From Comicbooks to Cinema"

[728] "Bam! Pow! Bang! From Comicbooks to Cinema"

[729] "Bam! Pow! Bang! From Comicbooks to Cinema"

[730] Stan Lee, "Howard the Duck proposal," Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

As he concludes the piece, it becomes clear that for Lee, respect for comics and their audience is best expressed by approaching the material with the same focus on "realism" that the editor and his collaborators had brought to *The Fantastic Four* in 1960. "To sum up, the superhero film must be subject to the same rules as any other well-crafted film. An audience will only suspend disbelief when the characters are clearly defined, the motivations are understandable and the fantasy angles are juxtaposed with realism in all other aspects."[731] The approach Lee had developed decades earlier was the only way to avoid another fiasco like *Howard the Duck*.

<div align="center">A Comic Book Preview</div>

By the end of the decade, the big-budget, star-studded, pre-sold approach to filmmaking that defined Carolco had come to dominate the major studios as well. As laid out in a famous 1991 memo by Disney studio head Jeffrey Katzenberg, "The theory goes that the way to ensure a successful movie is to release a high profile, highly promoted film, featuring at least one major star. It is felt that this kind of film not only has a built-in audience, but it also ensures a big opening weekend."[732]

The ultimate example of such a film, the pinnacle of the blockbuster '80s, was a comic book adaptation opus, *Batman*. The film was produced by a pair of filmmakers who would become emblematic of the excesses of high-concept Hollywood. Jon Peters had parlayed his position as Barbara Streisand's hairdresser into a producer credit on 1976's *A Star is Born* while Peter Guber had worked his way up through the ranks at Columbia Studios. Batman was not the first superhero in whom Guber had expressed interest - around 1973, he had made tentative overtures to Marvel about a potential Spider-Man

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[731] "Bam! Pow! Bang! From Comicbooks to Cinema"

[732] Jeffrey Katzenberg, "The Teachings of Chairman Jeff," *Variety* Vol. 342 Iss. 4, 4 Feb. 1991, pg. 5

feature.[733] That film never materialized, but over the course of the '80s the pair produced several films, including the hits *Rain Man* (1988) and *The Color Purple* (1985). Unlike some producers, Peters and Guber generally had little involvement in the production of the films to which they were attached. Instead, their genius lay in marketing.

Batman was a quintessential example of the "high-concept" film, the type of movie that dominated the blockbuster output of the major studios during the latter half of the '80s. The simple storyline is spruced up with a dynamic visual style. Guber and Peters were far more involved in *Batman*'s production then was normal for the pair, a reflection of the fact that the entire project was as much a marketing campaign as it is a film. [734] The picture was designed as a series of segments that can be separated out and sent tumbling down the ancillary media pipeline; here's a musical interlude that can be converted into a Prince video, there's a series of images ready to be digitized for the Nintendo video game.[735]

In sharp contrast to the post-2002 comic book films, it is also a picture in which a number of participants lay authorial claim to the work through the distinctiveness of their creative voice. The cartoon-gothic style of the film is recognizable even to the most casual cinephile as the trademark of former animator Tim Burton.[736] The Joker is less a fully-realized character then Jack Nicholson's star persona in clown makeup. Prince provides several songs, and the film halts the narrative so that lengthy excerpts can be played without new plot information vying for the audience's attention. The logic of late-80s Hollywood, however, dictated that the ostentatious presence of recognizable creators was necessary.

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[733] A. Alan Friedberg to Stan Lee, 19 Feb. 1980, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[734] Prince 217

[735] Wyatt

[736] It should be noted that Anton Furst provided the production design.

The need to pre-sell films to video and foreign buyers meant that bankable names – primarily, at this point, stars and directors – took on outsized importance. Frank Price, who had headed Columbia Pictures from 1978 to 1983, explained: "A $20,000,000 picture with names has less risk than a $10,000,000 picture without names. You have tangible aspects – video, foreign, and so on – with major actors and directors. Without them there is a huge risk and you can lose all the money. In fact, you probably will."[737]

The film is also typical of late-80s blockbusters due to the huge amounts poured into its production and the salaries of its stars. Jack Nicholson earned only $6 million for the film, less than his usual salary – but he also took a percentage of the film's earnings and merchandise sales, a deal that eventually rewarded him upwards of $50 million.[738] Negative costs for the film were $50 million, but this price tag ballooned to $120 million after advertising and distribution costs were added.[739] The lavish expenditures all seemed to pay off. *Batman* grossed over $251 million domestically, making it the fourth most successful picture of the decade and the most successful film Warner Bros. had released to date. For Hollywood, Katzenberg argues, the success of *Batman* was the vindication of the way studios did business in the late '80s. The film "combined action and hardware with an established fictional hero and an established real-life star, Jack Nicholson."[740] Several projects based on or inspired by comics were rushed into production. The years following *Batman* would see films including *Dick Tracy* (1990), *Dark Man* (1990), and *The Rocketeer* (1991) hit theatres.

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[737] Prince

[738] David Hochman, "The Biggest Movie Payouts," *Entertainment Weekly*, 3 March 2000

[739] Peter Fitting, "A Virtue of Necessity: Financial Limitations and the Emergence of the Video Fringe," Science Fiction and Market Realities, eds. Gary Westfahl and George Slusser, (Athens: University of Georgia, 1996)

[740] Katzenberg

But Hollywood's mood was about to change, and superheroes would once more be in the wrong place at the wrong time. 1989, the year of the "Blockbuster Summer," during which studios reveled in the success of *Batman*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and *Lethal Weapon 2*, gave way to a year of flops in 1990. Blockbusters constructed according to Hollywood's high-concept blueprint flopped one after another, as *Back to the Future III*, *Gremlins 2*, *Another 48 Hours*, *Days of Thunder*, *Rocky V*, *Havana*, and *Bonfire of the Vanities* all proved to be box office disappointments. The Christmas of 1990 was disastrous for Hollywood, and in the new year a wave of fiscal conservatism swept the industry. As Nancy Griffin and Kim Masters explain, "a hardheaded austerity had set in with the dawn of the nineties. With the cost of making and marketing movies rising sharply and profit margins growing slimmer, all the… studios in town had become more bottom line oriented."[741] Warner Bros.' response to skyrocketing production costs, explained by chairman and CEO Robert Daly in an interview with *Variety*, was typical, as the studio eschewed, "the high-profile, star-driven material that has provided the studio its greatest successes and by concentrating on developing in-house the kind of lower-budget, story driven material that has proved its greatest weakness."[742] The major studios held steady or cut the number of films they released and tried to stick to an average $23.6 million budget.[743] After hitting a peak in 1990, negative costs declined by 4% the next year.[744] The sole exception to this new conservatism was at Sony, where Peters and Guber continued the profligate ways they had displayed when producing *Batman* in 1989. The sequel, *Batman Returns*, was released in 1992 and would prove the costliest film up to that point.[745] While the caped crusader's new outing was a hit, there were enough warning signs for other studios to maintain their wariness of franchise films in general and superhero pictures in particular. *Batman*

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[741] Nancy Griffin and Kim Masters, <u>Hit and Run</u>, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 257

[742] Charles Fleming, "Daily Diet For Warners: Easy on Fatty Deals." *Variety* Vol. 342 Iss. 3, 28 Jan. 1991, pg. 1

[743] Richard Natale, "H'Wood Bets Less is More," *Variety* Vol. 344 Iss. 4, 29 Aug. 1991, 1

[744] Lawrence Cohn, "Majors' Budget Police Clamp Down on Big Pix," *Variety* Vol. 345 Iss. 5, 11 Nov. 1991, pg. 5

[745] Cohn 5

Returns' merchandise sales were disappointing[746] and profit participation sucked up 30% of the film's gross.[747] The film was the year's biggest hit at the box office and grossed well internationally, but it proved significantly less profitable then smaller pictures like *Wayne's World*, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, and *Sister Act*.[748]

The most visible manifestation of this backlash against blockbuster bloat was an ostentatious 28-page memo issued on January 11, 1991 by Disney Studios chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg that, though ostensibly meant to be circulated only within Disney, was widely believed by industry insiders to have been written with the intention of leaking it and positioning Katzenberg as the spokesman for financial restraint within the entertainment industry.[749] Katzenberg chided, "It seems that, like lemmings, we are all racing faster and faster into the sea, each of us trying to outrun and outspend and outearn the other in a mad sprint toward the mirage of making the next blockbuster." As a result of the mania for blockbusters, costs have escalated, profitability has slipped and our level of risk has compounded." [750] Katzenberg was not shy about joining the industry's chorus of condemnation directed at Carolco. He also pointed the finger at his own studio, however, and his primary target was the comic-based film *Dick Tracy*.

As Katzenberg wrote, ""Dick Tracy," is a case in point as to how the box-office mentality is affecting the movie going experience." The Disney studio chief expressed his pride in the film, but lamented that it was viewed as a failure by the absurd standards established by its inspiration, "being savagely disparaged as 'having failed to achieve 'Batman'-like success.'" Ultimately, the cycle of blockbuster films – and, more specifically, comic book films – was unsustainable: "If every major studio

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[746] Jennifer Pendleton, "'Batman Returns' Merchandise Not Going Through the Roof," *Variety* Vol. 348 Iss. 2, 3 Aug. 1992, pg. 58

[747] Charles Fleming, "H'Wood Seeks Secret to Sequel Success," *Variety* Vol. 348 Iss. 3, 10 Aug. 1992, pg. 1

[748] Lawrence Cohn, "Profits the Thing, Not the Box Office Tally," *Variety* Vol. 348 Iss. 11, 5 Oct. 1992 pg. 5

[749] Marc Berman and Claudia Eller, "Industryites Nod and Wink," *Variety* Vol. 342 Iss. 4, 4 Feb. 1991, pg. 5

[750] Katzenberg

release must aspire to repeat the 1989 success of 'Batman,' then we will undoubtedly soon see the 1990's equivalent of 'Cleopatra,' a film that was made in the hope of repeating the 1959 success of 'Ben-Hur.'"[751] Superhero cinema, it seems, was sending Hollywood careening towards the same economic disaster it experienced in the 1960s. As industry wags would point out, Disney seemed slow to follow its own advice, releasing comic book blockbuster *The Rocketeer* in June 1991 to disappointing results.[752] A *Variety* article on Hollywood's increased trepidation regarding sequels would feature a cartoon of the Rocketeer, planted headfirst into the ground – comic book movies remained the poster children for Hollywood's self-destructive obsession with blockbuster franchises.

Despite Hollywood's momentary disenchantment with superhero movies, *Batman* was a groundbreaking film that had opened studio gates to comic book characters. The film had been adroitly leveraged across a range of ancillary markets, indicating the degree to which superheroes were ideally adapted to Hollywood's emerging corporate structure. Though its preoccupation with an authorial director and star and its series- rather than serial-based poetics differentiated it from the comic-based films of the 21st century, it pointed the way towards an emerging mode of blockbuster cinema that Marvel would dominate.

Before Marvel's ascendency, however, a very different kind of superhero would fill movie theatres during the '90s. This decade of comic book cinema would be as heavily influenced by the 1990 hit *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (*TMNT*) as it was by *Batman.* In 1984, Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird released the first issue of *TMNT* through Mirage, their independent publishing company. The book, printed entirely in black & white, was a satire of Frank Miller's well-received 1979 to 1983 run on Marvel's *Daredevil,* a playful jab by a miniscule independent publisher against one of the two giants that

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[751] Katzenberg

[752] "Memo Time Again, Jeff," *Variety* Vol. 343 Iss. 3, 29 Apr. 1991, pg. 3

dominated the comic industry. Though humorous, the book was also decidedly darker in tone then most later versions of *TMNT*. The comic proved to be a wild success, inspiring an explosion in the number of independent, black & white comic publishers. This publishing boom collapsed in late 1986 and 1987, but the popularity of the Turtles held steady. In 1990, New Line Cinema, an independent studio with experience in semi-serialized franchises thanks to the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, distributed the first Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles film. The feature proved to be wildly successful, and Hollywood took note.

Over the next decade, the studios would turn to a new breed of independent publishers to find material to translate to film. Publishers like Malibu, Dark Horse, and Image emerged in large part out of opposition to Marvel and DC's editorially-driven creative process, and they offered filmmakers fresh IPs unencumbered by years of continuity and world-building. What's more, the characters produced by these young publishers suited Hollywood's taste for grim, cynical, dark heroes in the style of the 1989 Batman or the original comic book Turtles. 1990s comic book cinema would be defined not by Spider-Man and Captain America but by *The Crow* (1994), *Dr. Giggles* (1992), *Timecop* (1994), and *Spawn* (1997).

As the industry's new, independent publishers found success in Hollywood, the aging leviathan Marvel seemed to be stumbling towards its demise. Stan Lee tried in vain to interest the publisher's new ownership in the possibilities of Hollywood partnerships, but to no avail. By 1996, Marvel declared bankruptcy. It seemed likely that the dawning era of comic book cinema would go on without either Marvel or Lee.

Chapter 6

<u>**The Long Grim Decade**</u>

Batman and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* proved that audiences were willing to watch superheroes on film. Despite a brief moment of hesitation regarding comic book-based films prompted by economic difficulties within the studios and a string of high-profile comic-based flops, Hollywood's interest in comic book properties quickly returned – but Marvel was in no position to take advantage of this reemergent interest in superhero IPs. New owner Ronald Perelman had little taste for Hollywood bookkeeping, instead seeking to leverage Marvel's pantheon of characters in other ways, ways that ultimately proved disastrously misjudged. Exacerbating matters, a conflict regarding the nature of authorship that had simmered in the comic industry since the 1960s came to a head in the early '90s, as a cadre of young artists rejected the increasingly restrictive editorially-driven creative systems of DC and Marvel and founded a new company, Image. Perelman's management of Marvel and the conflict between editors and artists would combine to drive the venerable publisher into bankruptcy.

When Hollywood sought out superhero inspiration during the '90s, it tended to turn to Image and several other young, independent, creator-oriented publishers such as Dark Horse and Malibu. These companies produced a steady stream of dark, violent heroes such as The Crow and Spawn who seemed likely to appeal to the same audience who flocked to the gothic *Batman*. These weren't the type of heroes Lee had helped create in the '60s, and the former editor, now in his '70s, discovered that even Marvel's management had little interest in his efforts to bring the publisher's pantheon of heroes to the big screen. Lee found himself marginalized and even demonized by a new generation of fans and comic creators who conceived of artists as the auteurs of the process of comic creation and professed open contempt for editors. Over the course of the decade, Lee found himself alienated from much of the comic community, including Marvel itself.

<u>The New Boss</u>

The man who had purchased Marvel from New World hated showbusiness and his interest in pop art began and ended with the Warhol and Lichtenstein prints that hung on his office wall.[753] He was Ronald O. Perelman, a corporate raider who had cut a bloody swathe through Wall Street in the deregulated atmosphere of the '80s. Over the course of the decade, Perelman spearheaded a number of high-profile corporate takeovers, swallowing companies including Technicolor and, most notably, Revlon. Perelman's headline-grabbing raids were only possible because of the support of his steadfast backer Michael Milken. Milken had pioneered the use of the "junk bond," bonds whose principle might never be repaid but which offered high interest rates, and with the seemingly limitless resources they provided backed a hand-picked collection of financial upstarts, men like Perelman, as part of a multi-year assault on a corporate landscape that he and his allies viewed as stodgy and bound by outdated traditions.[754]

Perelman's appraisal of Marvel soon after acquiring the company must have seemed reassuring to Lee and anyone else eager to see the company's characters make the leap to other media: "It is a mini-Disney in terms of intellectual property…. Disney's got much more highly recognized characters and softer characters, whereas our characters are termed action heroes. But at Marvel we are now in the business of the creation and marketing of characters."[755] Lee was excited to be part of a vertically-integrated media empire with the financial resources New World lacked: "When Ron took over, I was

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[753] Comic Wars

[754] The Predators Ball, Connie Bruck, pg 197

[755] Raviv, pg 12

excited by the prospect that, for the first time, Marvel would be owned by a very wealthy man who headed a very wealthy conglomerate. I hoped it would give us as much financial clout as our main rival, DC Comics, which was owned by Warner Bros."[756]

For a time, it seemed Lee's hopes might be realized. In the early '90s, Perelman purchased seven network-affiliated TV stations by acquiring SCI Communications.[757] With an investment from Rupert Murdock, Perelman grew these holdings into an impressive 16 stations.[758] He also purchased Genesis Entertainment, adding a second television syndicator to the one he had acquired in the New World deal. In 1994, he made waves in the entertainment industry by switching most of the channels he had acquired to Fox Affiliates, a deal that bolstered the up-and-coming network and earned Perelman a host of programming commitments.[759] "Perelman," the trade press noted, "is creating a business with no middlemen. He owns the production company, the syndicator, the ad sales firm and the TV stations."[760]

Perelman attempted to leverage the synergies he had assembled to a limited degree, adapting Marvel IPs into a familiar format – animation. *The Marvel Action Hour*, composed of segments starring The Fantastic Four and Iron Man, was syndicated through Genesis.[761] It gradually became clear, however, that despite Perelman's desire to change Marvel's primary business to the management and licensing of their extensive stable of characters, he had absolutely no interest in bringing the company's characters to cinemas or, beyond the occasional cartoon, to television sets. Perelman preferred cash in hand to nebulous commitments that might pay off at some future date, and thus was uniquely hostile to

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[756] Stan Lee and George Mair, Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee, (New York: Touchstone, 2002) pg 214

[757] Robert Marich, "Perelman's Brave New World," *Hollywood Reporter*, 23 Feb 1994

[758] Robert Marich, "Fox Deal 'New Platform' For New World, Perelman," *Hollywood Reporter*, 2 May 1994

[759] J. Max Robins, "New World, Perelman Get With the Program," *Variety* Vol. 355 Iss. 8, 20 June 1994, pg 19

[760] Jay Greene, "Perelman: Deep Pockets and Big Showbiz Ambitions," Vol. 353 Iss. 12, *Variety*, 24 Jan. 1994, pg.39

[761] Greene pg. 89

the idea of the sort of long-term investment and uncertainty filmmaking required. Perelman loved

basking in the attention of Hollywood executives and stars but he despised the reality of blockbuster

production, a field in which a producer could lose money on flop after flop before recouping his ivestment

on a megahit. It was no accident that Perelman had shuttered New World's film production operations as

soon as he purchased the company in 1989.[762] Perhaps more than anything, Perelman hated the murky

nonsense that was "Hollywood accounting," a different sort of slippery bookkeeping than the brand the

raider had made his life's work. Perelman was also unwilling to part with the merchandising rights for

any of Marvel's heroes, an issue that would prove a major sticking point with any interested producers.[763]

Even if Perelman had been inclined to bring Marvel's heroes to screens big and small, the publisher's

adventures in the tumultuous Hollywood of the 1980s had left the rights to the company's most popular

characters – particularly Spider-Man – enmeshed in a seemingly impenetrable web of competing claims

and adversarial lawsuits.

The idea of Marvel-based films was useful to Perelman strictly as a way to milk further cash out

of the publisher, and in 1996 he announced a fund to finance Marvel Studios primarily as a way to drive

investment in the rapidly sinking comic company. Perelman's New World announced a sequel to *The

Punisher* and a She-Hulk film starring Brigitte Nielson, but they never materialized. [764] As Marvel CEO

Bill Bevins explained, "Ronald likes to sell the hype, the potential of making a movie. But that's all."[765]

Hollywood still had little taste for Marvel IPs, even as they began to dip their toes back in the

comic book pool. After film studios momentarily turned away from the genre at the beginning of the

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[762] Joseph McBride, "Andrews Says 'The End' For New World's Filming Day," *Variety* Vol. 335 Iss. 1, 26 Apr. 1989, pg. 11

[763] Nancy Hass, "Marvel Superheroes Take Aim at Hollywood," *New York Times*, 28 June 1996, f4

[764] Howe

[765] Raviv, pg 269

decade, by 1994 a few comic films were making their way to multiplexes – that year saw the release of *The Mask* and *Timecop*, both based on properties from 7-year old publisher Dark Horse, as well as *The Crow*, adapted from a Caliber Comics series. Unlike Marvel's IPs, these franchises were new and fresh in a way studio executives understood. What's more, they were standalone properties with a relatively small number of creators, unsaddled by decades of continuity and characters whose development had been shaped by hundreds of different individuals. *Timecop*, for instance, had only featured in 5 comic issues, offering producers a story with an arc that fit the classic mode of Hollywood storytelling.

The lack of years of continuity was perceived as a distinct advantage by Hollywood. In the mid-90s Marvel approached Larry Marder, executive director at the young, vibrant comic publisher Image to assist in selling their properties. Marder lamented,

> The properties that they had, had just failed over and over again to sell to Hollywood. Think about it, you go in, and you make a pitch that the world's smartest man built a rocket ship and then went up with his family, and the world's smartest man forgot to shield the rocket ship against cosmic rays. It's laughable. The idea that Captain America was frozen in ice for 50 years was laughable in Hollywood… asking the Talmudic continuity scholars in Marvel editorial to throw away the holy litany of Stan and Jack to satisfy Hollywood was having no effect at all, they weren't getting anywhere.[766]

Similarly, the *Washington Times* noted in 1991 that "Some observers say Marvel characters are too firmly grounded in comicdom's peculiar reality ever to translate successfully to film."[767] Mitchell Goldman, president of New Line Studios, indicated a remarkable disinterest in the unique universe-building openness that defined mainstream superhero comics when he commented on Hollywood's increasing

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[766] Howe 371

[767] Piccoll

interest in comic-based properties: "what's interesting about comic-book creations is that they are a clearly defined beginning, middle and, sometimes, an end story with interesting different characters."[768]

Lee kept dutifully plugging along in his capacity as Marvel's increasingly sidelined Hollywood liaison, serving as creative consultant on a variety of projects that never reached the screen. He provided extensive notes for projects like the Wes Craven directed *Dr. Strange* and any other potential film adaptations that might briefly hew into view before sinking quickly into obscurity. In the mid-90s, an opportunity to gain media exposure for several Marvel characters presented itself. Much to Stan Lee's delight, several networks announced that they were prepared to greenlight shows based on comic heroes Daredevil and the Black Widow. Lee approached Bill Bevins, the former chief of Turner Broadcasting Systems that Perelman had placed in charge of Marvel. Lee had every reason to expect that his superiors would jump at the opportunity, but he was in for a shock. Lee recounts the conversation:

> [Bevins] said, 'Naah, I don't think we want to do it.'
>
> I said, 'Why?'
>
> And he said, 'Well, Stan, if it bombs – if a TV show bombs – it'll hurt the comic book.'
>
> I said, 'Bill, that doesn't make sense! If you think like that, you might as well never do anything. Here's a chance to get a TV show!' But I couldn't convince him.[769]

After a lifetime spent attempting to elevate comics to the cultural level of other media, Lee was told that a television program might cast unwanted opprobrium on the related comics. Lee being Lee, he put as optimistic a spin on the rejection as possible: "Still, I don't get frustrated. Whatever happens, I just go on to the next thing. I don't sit and brood and dwell. I figured he must have reasons. Bevins is a

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[768] NL Thinks 'Spawn' Ouc Will Be Stand-Up Comic, Martin Grove, 7/23/1997

[769] Raviv, pg 230

brilliant man. Maybe the deal with the networks wasn't good enough. I don't do the contracts, so I have no idea."[770]

Despite the brave face, Lee was growing increasingly impatient as Marvel media projects were sidelined one after another and his proffered advice went unheeded. As he periodically did, he shifted his efforts to breaking free of Marvel's orbit, joining with a former New World executive in an attempt to launch his own films. In a separate venture, he began a videotape series known as Comic Book Greats, which saw him interviewing the same comic stars who increasingly viewed him as the antagonistic remnant of corporately mandated industrial creativity. Interviewing representatives of a comic industry that had passed him by for a series of videos whose potential market had long since disappeared, Lee began to look more and more obsolete.

<u>Milking Marvel</u>

When Perelman looked at Marvel, the veteran raider saw a company that was too intent on creating new characters and not focused enough on licensing the ones that had already proved popular. After all, Perelman's management team concluded, the publisher hadn't created any successful new characters for close to 30 years – who cared about The Punisher or The Guardians of the Galaxy anyway? Perelman quickly set about increasing Marvel's income by shuttering departments and cutting workers in a cull that brought to mind the layoffs of 1957 and the darkest days of Lee's long association with the company. At the very moment when an auteurist bent in comic fandom that had emerged in the '70s was reaching previously unseen heights, celebrating the romantic genius of individual artists and deifying the

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[770] Raviv, pg 230

act of comic creation in a way that Lee, Kirby, Ditko, Thomas, and their colleagues could only dream of, the man in charge of Marvel put a firm kibosh on any creative endeavors.[771]

Perelman had his own unique notion of how best to leverage Marvel's assets. Eschewing film, he focused on stickers and trading cards. In 1995, Perelman bought sport card company SkyBox International for $150 million and sticker manufacturer the Panini Group. As comic artist John Romita explained, ""They wanted to make us a merchandising empire…. They were going to sell clothing and costumes and other products, and they got to the point where they told us to our face that 'comic-book production is the minor part of this company's future.'"[772] Adding to the absurdity of the endeavor, Marvel's new subsidiaries were substantially larger than the parent company.

Gradually, the true value Perelman had seen in Marvel became clear. The Wall Street wolf set up several holding companies with names like "Marvel Holdings" and "Marvel Patent Holdings" and issued huge amounts of junk bonds. Perelman piled mountains of debt onto Marvel, ballooning the company's obligations to $700 million, and happily pocketed hundreds of millions of dollars. As a skeptical New York Times article reported,

> The sale of stock in the company will not help Marvel to expand, because none of the money will stay at Marvel. The offering will raise up to $82 million, but all the proceeds will go either to pay bank debt or to parent companies of Marvel, which is a subsidiary of a subsidiary of a subsidiary of a subsidiary of a subsidiary of a company owned by Mr. Perelman, best known for controlling the Revlon Group.[773]

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[771] Raviv

[772] Howe 354

[773] Floyd Norris, "Boom in Comic Books Lifts New Marvel Stock Offering," *New York Times*, 15 July 1991, d1

As Perelman loaded Marvel with absurd mountains of debts and useless subsidiaries, Marvel's publishing arm was having its own difficulties. In the decades since Lee had left day-to-day comic creation behind, two new trends had come to dominate the industry. At their core, each of these trends posited a different model of authorship – were comics an artist-driven medium, the expression of a creator's unique vision, or were they corporately controlled, industrially produced works, their creators little more than interchangeable cogs to be switched out at the editor's will? In the middle of the '90s, both of these trends had grown grossly out of control, contorting the industry in ways it couldn't bear. A crash was inevitable, and when it came, it nearly ended Marvel for good.

Auteurs vs. Universes

In 1972, comic dealer Phil Seuling approached publishers with a proposal for a new way to sell comics. Seuling requested that publishers supply him with comics at a substantial discount. In exchange, rather than return unsold books for credit, the standard practice for newsstands and other retailers, Seuling agreed to keep all unsold copies. With the advent of this new direct market, comics began to move from newsstands and corner stores to a new breed of specialized comic retailers. These comic book store would carry the hundreds of new comic issues Marvel, DC, and other publishers released each week as well as keeping a large stock of older comics on hand for fans looking to complete a collection. Throughout the '80s, this new direct market became the primary retail outlet for the industry. In a related development, the comic audience became steadily smaller, older, and more devoted. The fan interest in comic creators that Lee had played such a key role in developing in the '60s reached new heights. As this new, creator-savvy readership came to play an outsized role among comic consumers, it buoyed aloft a new group of superstar artists. For the first time, creators often mattered more than characters to comic readers.

In the years since Lee first introduced readers to the Bullpen, comic creators had become increasingly assertive and visible. In the '70s, a generation of writers and artists who saw comic creation as a worthy goal in and of itself and not as a stepping stone to bigger and better things entered the field. With each new wave of writers and artists that joined the major publishers, the notion of comics as a valid means of artistic expression became more entrenched. This changing attitude among creators was matched by a similar change in attitude among fans. Creators were treated like stars by their readers, and an increasing number of fanzines and conventions created venues for the two groups to meet and ostentatiously demonstrate their new attitudes. Lee watched the attention and praise showered on creators like John Byrne and Frank Miller, a natural development of the innovations he had set in place in the '60s, with some jealously. In 1987, an interviewer asked Lee, "When you were writing and creating, you were just recognized by the people who bought [comics]. Do you feel you've missed out on something?" Lee replied, "I often think I got out of the business at the wrong time."[774]

Prior to the 1980s, it was very rare for a single creator to have complete artistic control over a book – to act as what Sean Howe describes as a comic auteur.[775] A few examples did exist - in the '60s Lee allowed the wildly talented Jim Steranko to write, draw, and ink a series of Nick Fury comics. In the next decade, Jim Starlin produced the odd sci-fi series *Adam Warlock* largely on his own. When Kirby returned to Marvel for several years in the mid-70s, he was largely given carte blanche to control the properties he created, walled off from concerns with continuity and editorial interference. In the '80s, however, series written and drawn by an individual became increasingly common, further feeding into the idea of comic creators as legitimate artists. Lending further steam to the rise of comic auteurs, the early '80s saw the dramatic growth of the graphic novel, longer-than-average comic stories featured in their own volumes. These tomes, frequently sold in book stores, gave readers a chance to become familiar

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[774] John Weber, Stan Lee

[775] Howe

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with individual creators and creators a chance to experiment with the comic form and escape the constraints of continuity.[776]

Lee's own attitudes towards these new developments were complex and often conflicted, reflecting the contradictions inherent in his twin role as editor/publisher and writer. As one of the industry's most prominent former creators, Lee was inclined to embrace the greater authorial freedom creators were beginning to enjoy. In the mid-80s, he told an interviewer, "The artists and writers are really doing what they want to do now. They're writing the kind of stories they want to do, which gives you the best stories, generally."[777]

Complicating Lee's response, however, were increasingly assertive demands from creators that their status as artists be recognized in substantive ways. Over the course of the '70s and '80s, creators like Neal Adams demanded more credit, more pay, and more control over their work. Lee, now Marvel's publisher, opposed such demands. After a lifetime spent asserting his own authorial voice in Marvel's comics, Lee somewhat hypocritically used the collaborative nature of the comic creation process to muddy issues of authorial credit and rebuff the younger artists' arguments: "comics are a team effort. I can say I created Spider-Man, but Steve Ditko, the artist who worked on it with me, will say: 'Hey, what about me? I drew it, and I helped with some of the plots.' And that goes for the inkers, colorists, letterers, and editors. It's such a complex process, how the hell do you know whom to pay for that?"[778] The threat of creator control was enough for Lee to write his collaborators back into the Marvel origin myth.

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[776] Gabilliet

[777] Tompkins

[778] Swires

The '70s and '80s also saw the development of another trend in the comic industry, a trend that was also brought about in large part by changes in the comic audience and which would eventually come into direct conflict with the focus on comic creators. As comic audiences became smaller, more dedicated, and more insular, as the direct market offered readers the reliable opportunity to purchase every issue in ongoing comic series and fan communities emerged to analyze every plot development with scientific precision, comic continuity became more tangled and byzantine. The interlocking storylines and consistently evolving shared universe that has come to define comic books is, to a considerable extent, another product of the Marvel Revolution. Though Batman and Superman had teamed up decades before Marvel's characters, the publisher's relatively small staff of creators in the early '60s aided in the creation of more elaborate and intertwined plotlines. At DC, in contrast, each editor was responsible for a different set of characters and jealously guarded their bailiwick, making meaningful universe building difficult. At Marvel, Lee, as the company's lone editor and primary writer, was heavily involved in almost every book the company published. Characters could move freely from one book to another and storylines could stretch from book to book as the creators sought more space to deepen characters and concepts. In 1965, as Lee and his collaborators became more certain of their reader's loyalty and the publisher's stability, this continuity began to dramatically intensify.

When fans-turned-creators like Roy Thomas joined the company, they took the complex, intertwining backstories created by Lee and his colleagues as the immutable foundation on which to build and expand the universe. Where Lee had kept the emerging Marvel mythology in his head, when Thomas became Editor-in-Chief Thomas he began collating elements of the history onto notecards to avoid contradicting earlier canon. These efforts to catalog and reify the Marvel Universe's history would expand exponentially over the course of the '70s and early '80s, as more and more fan-creators entered the field and comics increasingly catered to a small but loyal readership. Eventually, both DC and Marvel would have to hire dedicated historians for their fictional universes – and even then, the comic universes continued to grow deeper and more tangled. Ultimately, maintaining the integrity of a publisher's

universe – preventing contradictions and making sure that each character was used in a manner consistent with both contemporary and historic appearances – fell to the editor or editors. Where writers and artists were more and more responsible for the direction of individual series, editors were more and more responsible for the direction of the fictional universe as a whole.

The balance of power between auteur and universe and the related relationship between creators and editors – between a collaborative and a romantic model of authorship – waxed and waned at Marvel over the decades. The conflict played out in dramatic fashion during the tenure of Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter. Shooter was only 27 when he took the post in 1978. He would serve in the role until 1987, when he was dismissed by New World during their brief ownership of the publisher. Shooter was, without question, Marvel's most successful Editor-in-Chief since Lee stepped down from the post, stabilizing and improving sales and revitalizing the creative direction of the company's books. Nonetheless, his determination to empower editors at the expense of artists and writers eventually made him one of the most hated men in the comic industry. Shooter had stepped into a chaotic Marvel, a publishing house with struggling sales that frequently missed deadlines to submit material to the printers. Since Lee's resignation as Editor-in-Chief six years earlier, a rapidly changing series of replacements had allowed creators at the company a massive amount of freedom. Shooter attributed Marvel's disorganization largely to this freedom and to the related fact that a number of the company's top writers – Roy Thomas, Len Wein, Marv Wolfman – were being allowed to act as their own editors. The young Editor-in-Chief quickly put a stop to this, assigning even the most venerable writers to editors and greatly strengthening the authority of the role.

As Shooter strengthened the hand of Marvel's editors, he also began to emphasize increased continuity and major crossovers. In May of 1984 Marvel launched the first of a long series of crossovers, *Secret Wars*. The previous year DC had inaugurated the era of mega-crossovers with their *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, a series that was largely designed to clarify and simplify the history of the fictional DC universe, which had become so unwieldy that it was understood to be limiting creativity and discouraging

new readers. Marvel's *Secret Wars* was a quintessentially corporate product, a limited series conceived by Marvel management in cooperation with toy manufacturer Mattel and intended primarily to sell a new line of action figures. In the story, an intergalactic entity known as The Beyonder transported an assortment of Marvel's most popular heroes to an alien planet where they were pitted against one another in combat. Longtime fans loathed the series, but it sold like gangbusters.

Huge crossovers like *Secret Wars* would become a yearly event from both major publishers and their impact on individual comics would intensify dramatically. *Secret Wars* was a relatively self-contained tale told in the limited series, having only a minimum impact on the stories in the regularly published books. Later crossovers, however, ran through multiple regular books, with each episode of a title becoming little more than a chapter in an overarching tale, close to incomprehensible on its own or even as a chapter in the regular series. Such crossover events were almost always dictated by the Editor-in-Chief or executives above him. One result of the proliferation of cross-over events was to shift responsibility for the creative direction of a regular book from the artists and writer assigned to the title to an editor who was responsible for arranging and tracking the progress of the overarching megastory.

Another related result of such events was to shift reader loyalty from individual creators to corporately-controlled characters and the universe they inhabited. To understand a publisher's narratives consumers were required to follow a storyline potentially composed of chapters from dozens of different creative teams, inhibiting audience identification with any particular auteurs. The impulse to weaken authorial control by emphasizing characters was not, of course, a new one. It stretched back at least as far as the dime novel, when, Michael Denning explains, "the tendency of the industry was to shift from selling an 'author', who was a free laborer, to selling a 'character,' a trademark whose stories could be written by a host of anonymous hack writers and whose celebrity could be protected in court."[779] The

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[779] Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, (New York: Verso, 1998) pg 20

emphasis on character over creator had pervaded pulp magazines as well. In that industry, "it was the character and the appearance of creative continuity that mattered, not the writer or artist."[780] Editors like Mort Weisinger brought this attitude with them when they moved from the pulps to the comic industry.[781]

By the late '80s, the conflict between editor and creator was being played out in fan magazines, trade journals, and convention halls for all to see. One executive voiced the underlying assumption that drove the comic industry's mega-event culture and would eventually endear comic books to Hollywood: "the importance of the creative people is still secondary to the characters."[782] Donning his editor/publisher hat, Lee similarly diminished the importance of comic creators: "Comic books are like soap operas. These are characters that belong to Marvel, and we hire people to just keep the adventures rolling along. If the writer of Spider-Man suddenly breaks his arm, we assign a new writer. We know that Spider-Man will outsell our other titles no matter who writes it."[783] Lee, of course, had personal reasons for proclaiming such a view – the characters to whom fans would be loyal were mostly those he had co-created and to whom his name was forever linked. Lee was not particularly eager to have future generations of comic auteurs dilute his connections to the core of the Marvel pantheon.

As megaevents proliferated, creators began to flee both Marvel and DC. Frank Miller, the comic industry wunderkind responsible for writing and drawing *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Sin City*, voiced the opinion of many of these creators: "Marvel Comics is trying to sell you all on the notion that characters are the only important component of its comics… You can almost forgive them this, since their characters aren't leaving them in droves like the talent is."[784]

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[780] Jones 184

[781] Jones 184

[782] Howe 339

[783] Swires

[784] Howe 360

In the first years of Perelman's ownership of Marvel, the two competing impulses driving the comic industry reached a fever pitch. The art in comics was becoming more baroque, more hyper-sexualized, more absurdly violent, more "extreme" in every respect as artists worked to exert their personal style. Comic book mega-event crossovers were happening multiple times a year, producing bombastic, empty storylines and preventing the creation of new characters or the meaningful development of old ones.

A new generation of comic artists had begun to emerge in the late '80s, and their eventual star status would eclipse anything the industry had seen before – as the *New York Times* explained, it was an "age when a famous comic book artist can achieve almost as much renown as an actor."[785] The most prominent of these was Todd McFarlane, who began drawing fan attention when he became the artist on *The Hulk* in 1986. By 1989, McFarlane was popular enough to demand he be allowed to write as well as draw his own series, and he was handed a Spider-Man book and permitted to ignore the universe's wider continuity, freeing him from a significant degree of editorial oversight. His *Spider-Man* #1 was released in June 1990 and sold an amazing 3 million copies at a time when selling 400,000 copies made a book a huge success.[786] Even with his own book, McFarlane deliberately curtailed his creative impulses as a reaction against Marvel's policy of corporate authorship. As Kirby had done in the late '60s, the young

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[785] "From Archie to Spidey to Anne," *New York Times*, 17 Feb. 1991, pg f5

[786] "From Archie to Spidey to Anne": In April 2017, the top selling book sold 162.718 copies – the top selling Spider-Man book sold 62,515.

artist resolved not to create any new, interesting characters since Marvel would then control the fruits of his authorship.[787]

McFarlane was joined at Marvel by other young artists, creators like Jim Lee, Eric Larsen, Marc Silvestri, and Rob Liefeld. Their artwork bordered on caricature; Captain America's pectoral muscles jutted out several feet beyond his chin, Spider-Man contorted as if his spine had cracked, Jean Grey was posed like a pin-up model, complete with stiletto heels. Blood and brain sprayed everywhere as indistinguishable slabs of muscle buffeted against one another. Every corner of the frame was filled with detail. The art wasn't necessarily good, but it was distinct. Every jam-packed panel screamed of the artist's effort, never letting the audience forget his constant presence. As McFarlane himself explained, "if you look at the Spider-Man books, they've all got a McFarlane look to them, which is good for my career because it's free advertising for me."[788] Young readers and speculators gobbled the new style up, even as many older fans shook their heads.

As long as they were making money for Marvel, Perelman's management team wasn't eager to interfere with the young superstar artists. Veteran artist Louise Simonson commented of wunderkind Rob Liefeld:

> It took me about six months to figure out that Rob really wasn't interested in the stories at all. He just wanted to do what he wanted to do, which was cool drawings of people posing in their costumes that would then sell for lots of money…. I think that at that point anyone who looked like they could produce lots of instant cash for Marvel was likened to a god, and Rob Liefeld looked like he could do just that.[789]

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[787] Rich Johnston, "The Not Quite Secret Origins of Image Comics," *BleedingCool*, 26 Feb. 2012, https://www.bleedingcool.com/2012/02/26/the-not-quite-secret-origin-of-image-comics/

[788] Gary Groth, "…That's the Spice of Life, Bud," *The Comics Journal* #152, August 1992

[789] Howe 321

Any editorial interference was too much for Marvel's self-styled maverick artists; McFarlane put the point bluntly when he explained to an interviewer, "I just can't take fucking orders very well."[790] Conflict was inevitable.

Artists at Marvel and DC with less clout, however, found themselves at the mercy of editors and their mega-events. The crossover craze reached its height with November 1992's *The Death of Superman*, a lackluster story that received heavy media attention and was snapped up hand over fist by collectors convinced such a landmark event would ensure the book would increase in value. Th*e Death of Superman* was the ideal crossover mega-event; it spanned multiple issues of on-going series and centered around a seemingly fundamental change to a beloved character. Driven into a frenzy by *The Death of Superman*'s success, editors ensured that "landmark" changes to familiar characters occurred almost monthly, paying little to no attention to whether such developments were contiguous with the direction the current creative team was taking the series or if the change added anything to the character beyond immediate shock value. Batman was snapped in half by Bane and replaced by the more violent Azrael; Thor was banished from Asgard and replaced by the "extreme" Thunderstrike; Iron Man was supplanted by the gun-laden War Machine. Standalone issues of long-running series became a relative rarity as each issue became a chapter in a broader, company-wide narrative. In 1993 alone, Marvel featured the crossover events *X-Cutioner's Song*, *Infinity Crusade*, *Maximum Carnage*, *Fatal Attractions*, *Bloodties*, *Mys-Tech Wars*, and *Siege of Darkness* while DC published *Trinity*, *Knightfall*, *Bloodlines*, and *Justice League: Breakdowns*.

As the conflict between creators and editors intensified, Lee increasingly became viewed less as an avuncular raconteur and artistic genius and more as the embodiment of the faceless corporation that robbed the true comic creators of credit for their work. In the late '70s, locked in a struggle with Marvel

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[790] Groth

for control of his co-creation Howard the Duck, Steve Gerber wrote to *Comics Journal* to state, "Stan was responsible for a massive infusion of creativity into the industry twenty years ago… but he is also the man who, under the protective umbrella of Marvel company policy, has robbed Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and others of the credit due *them* as creators for those twenty years."[791] The statement is ambiguous as to how, exactly, Lee brought about the "tremendous infusion of creativity" that brought about the Marvel revolution. Was it through his creative input as a writer, or simply by acting as a competent editor and hiring real artists to create the books? The ambiguity may not have been an accident – in the years after his retirement as Editor-in-Chief, fans and creators had begun to question whether Lee had actually had much to do with the Marvel Revolution at all.

Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, still stinging from their treatment by Marvel, were happy to contribute to growing doubts about his former colleague's creative role. Ditko, a reclusive figure who generally avoided interviews, emerged in the fan press occasionally to take a swipe at Lee. Kirby, on the other hand, was constantly in the public eye in fan journals and at comic conventions. By the mid-80s, Kirby claimed to have been the sole creator of the entire Marvel universe. Strikingly, he coopted Lee's origin story of the Marvel Revolution, a tale that had been retold so often it had achieved the status of myth. An attack on this story was a strike at the bedrock of Lee's public, authorial persona: "I came back the afternoon they were going to close up. Stan Lee was already the editor there and things were in a bad way. I remember telling him not to close because I had some ideas…. I felt I had to regenerate things. I began to build a new line of superheroes." Kirby continued, claiming Lee was not even a writer in the most basic sense: ""Stan Lee was not writing. I was doing the writing."[792] The artist even took credit for creating Spider-Man, a character whose comic he had neither drawn or written. Kirby's assistant and

[791] Howe 231

[792] Pitts Jr.

friend Steve Sherman claimed that Kirby argued Lee's outline for *Fantastic Four* #1, frequently reprinted and preserved at the University of Wyoming, was a forgery written well after the book was published.[793]

Not surprisingly, Lee responded to Kirby's claims with the sharpest words the perpetually good-natured editor ever leveled at his erstwhile colleague: "Well, I think that Jack has taken leave of his senses… Jack was at home drawing these monster stories, until the day I called him and said: 'Let's do the Fantastic Four.'"[794] In 1987, the two spoke for the first time in almost a decade. Kirby was the guest on a New York radio show and Lee called in to the program. Their conversation was respectful, but Lee made sure to assert his role in the collaborative process: "every word of dialogue in those scripts was mine…. Every story." Kirby rebutted Lee with an explicit appeal to the romantic ideal of authorship, condemning the collaborative process as fundamentally inauthentic: "I'm only trying to say, I think the human being is very important. If one man is writing and drawing and doing a strip, it should come from an individual. I believe you should have the opportunity to do the entire thing yourself."[795] In Kirby's impassioned plea, we can hear clear echoes of auteurists like Andrew Sarris, proclaiming "meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings."[796]

The two men never spoke again. Lee attended Kirby's funeral in 1994 after requesting and receiving permission from his family. He slipped quietly out the back as soon as the service concluded. For once in his life, Lee was not eager to speak to anyone.

Throughout the late '80s and '90s, creators rallied around Kirby as he attempted to reclaim his artwork from Marvel, villainizing Lee as the face of the oppressive corporation. A 2004 Stan Lee cameo in *Fantastic Four* 511 illustrates just how much perceptions of Lee had changed. The Four, trapped in

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[793] "Comic Book Legends Revealed #222"

[794] Howe

[795] Howe 305

[796] Andrew Sarris, 'Toward a Theory of Film History," *American Cinema*, (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1996) pg 30

Heaven, come face-to-face with the creator of the universe, Jack Kirby. In the midst of their conversation, Kirby receives a phone call and briefly discusses the fate of several of his creations with the unheard voice. A stunned Sue Storm asks, "Who… who called?" To which a grim-faced Kirby-God replies, "My collaborator. 'Nuff said." The Four look on, aghast.[797] The tone contrasts starkly to Kirby and Lee's cameo in *Fantastic Four* #10, more than four decades earlier, in which the two men depicted themselves as good-natured collaborators, cooperating in the production of the Fantastic Four's comic.

In his 1987 phone conversation with Kirby, Lee acknowledged a sentiment common among comic artists that writers were, at best, of secondary importance in the process of comic creation: "look, Jack, nobody has more respect for you than I do, and you know that, but I don't think you ever felt that the dialogue was very important. And I think you felt, anybody can put dialogue together, it's what I'm drawing that matters. And maybe you're right. I don't agree with it, but maybe you're right." By the early '90s, the opinion Lee described had peaked among comic creators and fans. Todd McFarlane and his young cohort of contemporary artists held to a particularly extreme version of the notion, arguing that writers were an unnecessary impediment to the creative process, a sentiment that echoed the most extreme auteurist voices among the French New Wave. MacFarlane, in the midst of writing and drawing his own Marvel comic, made the secondary importance of writing explicit: "Uh… I don't really consider myself a writer, so I don't pay attention to writing. Now I'm sure the people at Marvel won't be too impressed with that statement, but by the time they read it, it'll be too late."[798] Another young comic superstar, Erik Larsen, wrote an infamous anonymous letter to the *Comic Buyer's Guide* in which he welcomed the increase in artists writing their own books as a way to lessen the impact of the least necessary members of the creative process, the writers: "the repetitious, rehashed, reworked hackwork of these tired writers is

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[797] Mark Waid, "Hereafter: Part 3," *Fantastic Four* #511, Marvel Comics 2004

[798] Howe 320

likely to drag this industry down, anyway."[799] Two panels at 1992's San Diego Comic-Con were provocatively titled "Do Artists Need Writers?"[800] Lee, the most famous writer in comic history, saw his reputation further diminished.

Taking advantage of their new prominence, in February 2, 1992 Todd McFarlane, Rob Liefeld, Erik Larsen, Jim Lee, Marc Silvestri, and several more of the industry's most popular artists announced the formation of their own company, Image. Image would allow each of its artists to control any intellectual property they might create and to act as their own editors. McFarlane was quick to explain that the company was founded on the understanding that the artist, not the writer, was the auteur of the comic book.[801]

From the moment of its inception, Image drew the attention of other culture industries. The Image creators were young, driven, and sexy in a way the elderly, slightly desperate Lee was not. In particular, Rob Liefeld, only 24 when he and the other Image artists left Marvel, seemed to embody American youth as it was understood by a range of film producers and product marketers. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, which covered the Orange County based artist extensively, Liefeld had "the ultimate Generation X lifestyle."[802] Experts like Melchoir Thompson were quick to explain that Liefeld's timely youthfulness translated into his art; "Liefeld's comics are striking and they have a unique '90s sensibility."[803] A few years later, the publisher of the comic journal *Wizard* would tell a reporter, "Rob can give the characters new blood by giving them a '90s feel."[804] As Beth Ann Krier, a reporter for the

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[799] Eric Larson, "Name Witheld," *Comics Buyer's Guide*, http://members.tripod.com/fantom_dragonfan/namewh.html

[800] Peter David, "But I Digress," *Comics Buyer's Guide* 983, 18 Sept. 1992

[801] Johnston

[802] O.C. Artist to Rescue Heroes; Comics, Dan Margolis, Los Angeles Times, 1/3/1996

[803] Comic Book Whiz Seeks New 'Image', Kristina Sauerwein, Los Angeles Times 12/31/1992

[804] O.C. Artist to Rescue Heroes; Comics, Dan Margolis, Los Angeles Times, 1/3/1996

Los Angeles Times remarked when discussing Rob Liefeld's Youngblood, "This is not just a comic book for the MTV Generation. It's *from* the MTV Generation. And "Youngblood" – the new, in-your-face group of superheroes – is taking the comic industry by storm."[805] MTV was a common point of reference for reporters discussing Liefeld and the other Image founders; later that same year, another *Los Angeles Times* reporter referred to Image's characters as, "hip new super-heroes with MTV-style wardrobes."[806]

The Image team's youthful appeal quickly translated into cross-media partnerships. Rob Liefeld signed a deal with Steven Spielberg to create a movie-ready superhero for his Amblin Entertainment.[807] By 1996, he had sold five pre-existing characters to major producers. His Prophet was at TriStar, New Line had acquired Avengelyne and Badrock, and he was creating yet another new hero, this time for Tom Cruise and Paramount, called The Mark.[808] WildC.A.T.s, created by Jim Lee, enjoyed a single season run as a Saturday morning cartoon. Remarkably, the title card proclaimed the show, *Jim Lee's WildC.A.T.s.*, an acknowledgement of how central the role of the author was to the property even in the context of a low-budget animated series. McFarlane's grim hero Spawn, one of his first creations for Image, reached the big screen in 1997, enjoying a major theatrical release well before any of the characters Lee had played a role in creating. McFarlane's brooding hero also spawned a toy line that made the artist "the [toy] industry's first – and greatest – auteur."[809] When Robert Kirkman, the creator of *The Walking Dead* comic series, sought to break into Hollywood, it was Liefeld and McFarlane he called on for advice.[810] Even Image's trendiness, however, was not a complete guarantor of Hollywood's respect. The young guns at Image ran up against Hollywood's continued disdain for comics even as they experienced more

[805] Drawing on the Cool Factor, Beth Ann Krier, Los Angeles Times, 4/15/1992

[806] Adventure Capitalists, Patrice Apodaca, Los Angeles Times, 10/13/1992

[807] Comic Creator Inks Deal, Los Angeles Times, 1/25/1993

[808] Coloring for the Big Screen, Cheo Hodari Coker, Los Angeles Times 10/1/1996

[809] Abraham Riesman, Tod McFarlane (Still) Answers to No One, Vulture 3/12/2017

[810] Rich Johnston, The Not Quite Secret Origins of Image Comics, 2/26/2012

success than Lee ever had. While adapting his comic *Witchblade* for television, artist Marc Silvestri frequently found the program's creative team "incredibly dismissive and patronizing to him as the 'comic book guy.'"[811]

As Marvel floundered in the mid-90s, the publisher turned to several of Image's artists in an attempt to bring their youthful edge to the veteran publisher's struggling titles. In 1996, they hired Rob Liefeld and Jim Lee to redesign almost all of the Marvel heroes. This nearly unprecedented out-sourcing was motivated in part by a desire to update their IPs in a way that might appeal to Hollywood, something Image's founders seemed far more adept at then anyone at Marvel. As Liefeld explained, "Two years ago, movie studios considered Captain America too hokey," adding that after he redesigned the character, "several studios have expressed interest."[812] Ultimately, the redesigned heroes elicited little interest from major studios or comic buyers, and the characters were quickly reverted to the form Lee and his collaborators had given them decades earlier.

Image proved more effective at wooing Hollywood then they did at other, more fundamental elements of comic publishing. Image's first issues proved tremendously popular, but trouble loomed. Without editorial oversight, the publisher's books began coming out later and later, sometimes missing whole months. At the same moment, DC and Marvel's constant barrage of mega-events reached previously unknown heights, with each month seeming to inaugurate a new, universe-altering crossover.

In early 1993, the excesses of artists and editors brought the industry crashing down in a disaster that would almost end Marvel for good. Image became increasingly tardy in shipping comics; In February of 1993, for instance, the young publisher managed to ship only 2 of their 13 announced titles. Comic retailers had already paid for the comics and were left dangerously exposed. That month also saw

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[811] Rich Johnston, The Not Quite Secret Origins of Image Comics, 2/26/2012

[812] Deborah Shapley, "Creating Parallel Universes for Profit," *New York Times*, 30 Sept. 1996 pg d9

the beginning of the current DC mega-event, in which Superman returned from his brief demise. Comic stores had been caught unaware by the huge demand for *The Death of Superman* and had ordered far too few copies. They were determined not to make the same mistake again, and ordered massive numbers of the comics that promised to showcase the character's return. By this time, speculators had figured out that comics weren't going to put their kids through college, and the book sold very poorly. Comic stores had always operated on very thin margins, and the combined failures of Image and the big two publishers proved too much for many of small retailers to handle. Thousands of comic stores went out of business in the following months, and with them went a huge chunk of the revenue on which the major publishers depended. Marvel's stock plummeted 60%.

<center>Toy Men</center>

By 1995, Marvel appeared to be headed towards oblivion. The company was laden with outrageous amounts of debt and several worse-than-worthless subsidiaries. Even the company's core publishing unit seemed broken beyond repair, incapable of creating a decent comic or selling the terrible ones they produced. As the company declared bankruptcy, a pair of toy makers emerged as unlikely saviors.

Ike Perlmutter lacked the flash of Ron Perelman, shunning the limelight to such a degree that there are very few extant photos of the man. He had made his fortune buying surplus goods and selling them to dollar stores and other low-cost retailers. By 1990 he had accumulated enough capital to purchase a dying Canadian Toy Company known as Toy Biz. Perlmutter didn't like paying royalties for the intellectual properties on which he based his toys, and he saw opportunity in Perelman's plans to turn Marvel into a new Disney. In 1993, Perlmutter formed a unique relationship with Perelman's Marvel: Toy Biz got permanent permission to produce toys based on Marvel's heroes and Marvel got 46% of the

toy company. The deal proved lucrative for Toy Biz, one of the few corporate entities associated with Marvel to perform well in the mid- to late-90s.[813]

The artist who designed toys for Perlmutter was named Avi Arad, a man toy industry analysts called "the most successful toy developer in the business."[814] Arad was the mind behind toys including Troll Warriors, the Zap It disappearing-ink gun, Baby Wanna Walk, and My Pretty Ballerina.[815] Unlike Perlmutter or Perelman, Arad truly enjoyed reading Marvel comic books and wanted to make movies about them. In a desperate pitch to the bank in the midst of the publisher's bankruptcy crisis, Arad declaimed:

> Tell me, ladies and gentlemen. What do *you* believe Spider-Man is worth? If you had the right to get Spider-Man forever and ever, I think Spider-Man is a billion-dollar entity. It will make numerous amounts [sic] of movies, endless licenses, television shows…. You know, we live in one of the most creative countries in the world. But look around you and see how few characters have been introduced and survived. You have Star Wars, maybe Star Trek, and you'll be hard-pressed to name any other characters that survived that long.[816]

Not surprisingly, Arad found a kindred spirit in Lee, who happily opined in the midst of a vicious bankruptcy fight, "I hope Toy Biz takes over!"[817] Lee had finally found a man who not only shared his enthusiasm for bringing comic stories to film but who might be in a position to do something about it.

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[813] Adam Bryant, "Pow! The Punches that Left Marvel Reeling," *New York Times* 24 May, 1998

[814] Geraldine Fabrikant, "Perelman Group to Increase Marvel Stake," *New York Times*, 23 March 1993, pg. d4

[815] Carol Lawson, "A One-Man Thrill Factory for Kids," *New York Times* 8 July 1993, pg. c9

[816] Raviv 177

[817] Raviv 230 (?)

Arad's toy background was integral to his vision of how the Marvel Universe operated or how it might translate to other media. Since the early '80s, toymaking had been a fully transmedia business, with children encouraged to buy toys by complex, interrelated storylines that played out across media, particularly Saturday morning cartoons and comic books. G.I. Joe is a case in point: what had been introduced in 1964 as a generic 12-inch doll with a few variations in uniform and hair color was redesigned in 1982 as a line of 3.75-inch figures. The collection was now more akin to a pantheon of superheroes then a platoon of G.I.s, featuring a wide variety of colorfully costumed heroes and villains, each with special powers and personalities. To get young consumers invested in the little plastic men, Hasbro and its partners crafted a detailed universe for the characters, full of intertwining storylines, betrayals, violence, and soap-opera-esque interpersonal drama. This universe unspooled across a Saturday morning cartoon, a theatrical film, and a series of comics. Marvel created and published the comic. Marvel Productions animated the cartoon.

Despite Perelman's indifference and complete unwillingness to invest any of his own cash, Arad pursued potential Marvel films vigorously. He quickly took the reins of Marvel's Hollywood efforts, and by 1996 he was the head of the newly formed Marvel Studios. The studio's stated plan was to control pre-production, packaging script, director, and stars while relying on major studios for production and distribution. Arad framed the process as a reaction against Marvel's continual failure in Hollywood; "When you get into business with a big studio, they are developing a hundred or 500 projects; you get totally lost…. That isn't working for us. We're just not going to do it anymore. Period."[818] Hollywood, however, remained largely indifferent to Marvel and its IPs. In fact, Perelman had been trying to sell the publisher to media companies since 1994, but none had expressed much interest. Sony had briefly shown some curiosity, but never made a serious offer. Like Marvel's previous owners, Perelman was willing to give away the publisher's licensing rights for nominal fees. In 1993 he had sold the film and animation

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[818] Hass f4

rights to the hottest Marvel property, X-Men, to Fox for the ridiculously low cost of a one-time payment of $2.6 million and about 2% of the worldwide ticket sales, but the studio remained loathe to move forward with the project.[819]

Marvel continued to do a booming business in animation. The most successful of Marvel's '90s cartoon efforts was a long-running X-Men cartoon, which launched on Fox Kids in 1992. The show's birth was largely contingent on the goodwill of two powerful individuals, Rupert Murdoch and Margaret Loesch. Murdoch was actively pursuing partnerships with New World as he attempted to establish the Fox Network, and in 1994 he purchased a 20% stake in New World Communications. In exchange, Perelman's TV-stations abandoned their original affiliates and aligned with Fox. Three years later Murdoch would buy the company in its entirety for $2.48 billion, severing the decade-long connection between Marvel and the New World name.[820] Margaret Loesch had served as President and CEO of Marvel Productions from 1984 until 1990, when she accepted a job as head of the newly formed Fox Kids. In this role, she proved a consistent champion for Marvel adaptations, and the most visible fruit of this advocacy was five seasons of the animated X-Men program.

A few cartoons were far from enough to keep Marvel afloat. As it became increasingly clear that the publisher was a sinking ship, Perelman moved to salvage anything he could before the company was completely waterlogged. Perlmutter was deeply concerned that Marvel would drag down Toy Biz as it sunk, and watched in disgust as Perelman gave away the rights to the publisher's IPs left and right. In 1996 and for several years after, the characters Marvel had licensed away in the '80s began to revert to the company's control. As soon as Marvel's heroes came home, Perelman sent them away again, licensing them to new studios on incredibly generous terms. In several cases, he allowed producers to

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[819] "'Deadpool' Shows How Complicated Character Rights Issues Are," *Motley Fool*, 26 Feb. 2016, https://www.fool.com/investing/general/2016/02/26/deadpool-shows-how-complicated-character-rights-is.aspx

[820] Hass f4

retain rights to the publisher's biggest stars in perpetuity, provided they have a film in production every few years. When Perelman licensed Marvel to Universal so that the studio could use the heroes as the basis for a land in their new Orlando theme park, he was paid $500,000 up front and $500,000 each year for 10 years. In exchange, Universal received exclusive rights for the theme park use of the characters east of the Mississippi in perpetuity. Learning of the small sum Marvel received in return, an enraged Perlmutter sputtered, "That's like feed for chickens!.... As far as I'm concerned, Ronald is mortgaging everything now just to get cash for Marvel."[821]

The bankruptcy battle over Marvel's carcass was a particularly long and complex one. In November 1996, Carl Icahn, another corporate raider with a long-standing rivalry with Perelman, began purchasing Marvel's bonds in an effort to seize control of the struggling publisher. When all the legal maneuvers were concluded, Ike Perlmutter emerged as the unlikely owner of Marvel. Perlmutter had realized that Toy Biz's future depended on retaining the Marvel license, something Icahn would certainly not let them do. Perlmutter succeeded in convincing the banks that their only chance of recovering a significant portion of what they had lent Perelman was to let Toy Biz take over Marvel. In June 1998 Toy Biz and Marvel merged, with Perlmutter in control of the lot.[822] Throughout the bankruptcy fight, one of the key issues was which potential owner was most likely to make movies and thus reap the presumably enormous profits that could be passed on to the company's lenders. Yet having acquired Marvel, Perlmutter was in no particular hurry to start churning out feature films. Like Perelman, he had been steeped in a business background very different from the entertainment industry, and he preferred the certainties of the retail toy business to the confusion of IP management and movie and television production.

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[821] Raviv pg 49

[822] Raviv

Perlmutter choose an entertainment veteran as CEO of Marvel, handing the company's reins to Eric Ellenbogen, the former president of Lorne Michael's Broadway Video, but the two men were almost immediately at loggerheads. Perlmutter saw Ellenborgen as a self-indulgent spendthrift. 77% of the newly joined Marvel and Toy Biz's revenue came from toy sales, a situation that pleased Perlmutter; Ellenborgen dreamed of selling the toy business and concentrating almost all of Marvel's energy on film and television production. It was no shock that Ellenborgen was out of a job by July of 1998.[823]

Despite his disinterest in comic creators, Perelman knew how to appeal to the most famous of them all, Stan Lee. During the depths of Marvel's bankruptcy crisis, Lee expressed his feelings about Perelman: "I liked Perelman and I liked Bill Bevins. I really wanted it to work out for them." After reminiscing about the amount of money they paid him, Lee crowed: "They wanted to make sure I stayed. They told me I was the creative head of the company."[824]

Perlmutter lacked his former partner's deft touch in handling the 76-year-old comic creator. He barely knew (or cared) who Lee was, and after reviewing his contract as "Chairman Emeritus of Marvel Comics," chopped his salary in half and converted the lifetime position to a two-year posting. Arad, on the other hand, understood that Lee was integral to Marvel's identity and a key part of the publisher's appeal to potential filmmakers. In 1996, Arad had told *Daily Variety*, "There are so many people in Hollywood who grew up on Marvel Comics…. Guys like James Cameron, Chris Columbus, Geoffrey Wright, Wesley Snipes and Nicolas Cage, they all love this stuff. When one of them meets (Marvel comic guru) Stan Lee, it's hard to figure out who the biggest celebrity in the room is, they get so excited."[825] Arad was also aware that, should Lee choose to do so, he might be able to make troublesome claims of ownership regarding Marvel's heroes that could hinder potential movie deals. At Arad's prodding,

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[823] Raviv

[824] Raviv

[825] Michael R. Goldman, "Marvel Sets a New Agenda," *Daily Variety* 1 Oct. 1996

Perlmutter offered Lee a lucrative new contract. Lee received a lifetime appointment as Marvel Studio's "Chairman Emeritus" and continued to serve as Marvel's Publisher. In these capacities, he was expected to,

> serve generally as a spokesman for Marvel, including giving speeches and interviews and visiting conventions on Marvel's behalf;… confer on a regular basis with the creative staff at Marvel's various operations, guiding and advising the editorial and art personnel and the like in existing Marvel characters;… [and] work with motion picture and television producers and distributors to stimulate their licensing of Marvel characters and supervise movie and television projects of Marvel Characters on Marvel's behalf and be named executive producer or co-executive producer of such productions.

Despite this sweeping job description, Lee was expected to work for Marvel for no more than 10 to 15 hours a week. In exchange, he was to receive a base salary of $810,000 a year, growing to $1,000,000 dollars by 2002 – still less than Perelman had paid him.[826]

The most significant portion of the contract pertained to possible films based on Marvel's properties. Clause 4 (f) read, "In addition, you shall be paid participation equal to 10% of the profits derived during your life by Marvel (including subsidiaries and affiliates) from the profits of any live action or animation television or movie (including ancillary rights) productions utilizing Marvel characters."[827] It was an acknowledgement of Lee's success at positioning himself as the author figure of Marvel's entire fictional universe that he was awarded compensation for adaptations based on any of the publisher's properties, not merely the ones he had actually played a part in creating. With Marvel's cross-

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[826] Joe Sergi, The Law For Comic Book Creators, (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015) pg. 115

[827] Sergi 116

media future still unsure, this clause seemed fairly innocuous; within a few years, it would serve as the basis for an acrimonious lawsuit between Lee and Marvel.

Despite his new contract, Lee still felt slighted by Perlmutter's ignorance of his authorial role. He also sensed that, as much as he agreed with Arad about Marvel's Hollywood potential, the younger man was rendering him increasingly irrelevant. His opinion was sought less and less. In mid-1998, before he had signed his new contract, Lee had set out to reaffirm his creative credentials by partnering with a Hollywood executive, forming the internet company Stan Lee Media, and creating a new universe of characters. In early 2001, however, Stan Lee Media filed for bankruptcy and Lee's partner was charged with securities fraud and fled to Brazil. By then, however, a new role was about to present itself to Lee, a role for which he had been preparing for more than four decades.

Avi Arad was now Chief Creative Officer of the Marvel empire, and he remained far more enthusiastic about adapting Marvel properties to other mediums then Perlmutter. He had successfully convinced Fox to put *X-Men* into production, and the film was slated for release in 2000. There was also hope for a Spider-Man film at long last. Marvel copyright expert Carole Handler realized that Menahem Golan's fast and loose approach to legal matters had provided the publisher with an opportunity: the producer had never been properly registered with the US Copyright Office. After settling with MGM and Viacom, Marvel had at long last reclaimed the rights to their most famous hero. In 1999 the publisher sold the rights to Sony. With two Marvel properties in production at major studios, Arad sat back and waited. If they were successful, Perelmutter might see the wisdom of pursuing opportunities in Hollywood, and Arad might be in a position to negotiate deals with the studios that reflected the true value he felt the Marvel properties contained.[828]

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[828] Fawaz

Ultimately, it would not be Arad who ushered Marvel into a position of transmedia dominance. That role would fall to a young man named Kevin Feige. In 2000, Feige was earning his first producer credit on Fox's *X-Men*. Producer Lauren Shuler Donner had elevated her former assistant to his new role after Feige crammed his head full of Marvel mythology to prepare for the production.[829] When *X-Men* proved a hit, Arad hired Feige as his second-in-command almost instantly. By 2007, at the age of 33, Feige was the head of production at Marvel Studios.

In 1999, as Stan Lee worked to found Stan Lee Media and Avi Arad attempted to kickstart Marvel's big screen efforts, Warner Bros. released a film which would have a profound effect on the future of superhero cinema. *The Matrix* gripped audiences with a new kind of storytelling, in which narrative information regarding a vast fictional universe was scattered across multiple, narratively open episodes. It was a style of poetics that DC and Marvel had been developing for decades, one that had risen to such baroque levels by the early '90s that it played a role in the industry's near collapse. With the Matrix franchise, the Wachowskis had shown Hollywood how effectively this storytelling could entice viewers and encourage them to consume other media related to a franchise's storyworlds. As Henry Jenkins has pointed out, the Wachowskis were heavily influenced by comic books, albeit not those released by DC or Marvel. Instead, they had been inspired by Japanese manga and the work of Paul Chadwick, creator of the quirky superhero Concrete. Concrete was published by Dark Horse, once again demonstrating the influence of independent superhero comic publishers on the cinema of the '90s.[830]

The appeal of serialized, storyworld-based films would shortly be reaffirmed by the release of New Line's *Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), the start of an ambitious franchise based on J.R.R. Tolkien's classic fantasy. *X-Men*, meanwhile, would prove that even the seemingly stodgy heroes controlled by

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[829] Brooks Barnes, "With Fan at the Helm, Marvel Safely Steers Its Heroes to the Screen," *New York Times*, 7/24/2011, b1

[830] *Convergence Culture*

Marvel could find a large audience at cineplexes, an insight that would be dramatically reinforced by the success of *Spider-Man* (2002).   Over the course of the next decade, Marvel Studios, under the stewardship of Kevin Feige, would use these developments to vault to a position of unprecedented power in the film industry, reshaping the kind of movies Hollywood made – and the way it made them.

Chapter 7

<u>Reshaping Authorship</u>

In October of 2012, Jeff Gomez took the stage of the Loews Hollywood Hotel to address the audience at the Storyworld Conference, a gathering of the "global transmedia community."[831] Gomez is the founder of Starlight Runner Entertainment, a firm dedicated to helping movie studios and other clients develop transmedia universes to better sell their products. In that capacity, Gomez had provided consultation to a number of studios, helping the architects of franchises like Sony's Amazing Spider-Man and Men in Black, Fox's Avatar, and Disney's Tron and Pirates of the Caribbean scatter story information across a range of ancillary media.[832] Starlight Runner's very existence is a mark of the extent to which Hollywood had altered its thinking about the product it produces, shifting its focus from the production of films to that of narrative universes.

Gomez explained to the assembled listeners that what every studio wanted, the Holy Grail they would spend billions to uncover, was an "evergreen" storyworld. What defined an "evergreen" universe? The ability to produce an unlimited stream of marketable episodes across multiple media pipelines. What was one of the primary traits of such a rare and prized franchise? It was authorless.

It was a bold statement to make in front of a crowd which consisted largely of men and women who hoped to become transmedia authors. But it struck at a truth that earlier speeches from Disney executives and Lightstorm Entertainment producers had danced around. Of course, someone – a lot of someones – had to create every single iteration of a transmedia storyworld. Ultimately, however, the

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[831] *Storyworld Conference*, http://www.storyworldconference.com/ehome/33551/53719/

[832] *Starlight Runner*, http://starlightrunner.com/

marketability of these products was not tied to the continued involvement of any single individual. After all, individuals might die or retire or debate an executive decision. When you had an "evergreen" franchise, all that mattered was the universe and its corporate owners.

As a negative example, Gomez cited Harry Potter. Potter-based books and films had made billions of dollars and the "Wizarding World" they featured offered the potential for thousands more films and ancillary products. In the years since Gomez spoke, the Potter storyworld has spawned West End plays, more books, several theme park lands, and a new series of films.

But the success of all of these products is contingent on the involvement and approval of J.K. Rowling. For instance, the construction of the Harry Potter theme park area at Universal Studios Florida was the result of a partnership between Warner Bros. and Universal, but press materials constantly emphasized Rowling's intimate involvement in the project. Architects were so eager to obtain her unmitigated approval that they designed the areas' stores to be far too small and cramped to handle the immense crowds the planners expected, violating almost everything theme park designers believed about how best to design retail spaces to move merchandise and ensure happy guests. But in Rowling's vision, Hogsmeade was tiny and quaint, its stores frequented by a few dozen twee schoolchildren and not millions of rotund, sweaty tourists. And Universal absolutely needed Rowling.

Gomez also offered an example of the ideal "evergreen" franchise, an example that surprised no one: the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

The Hollywood landscape which Gomez described, in which the fortunes of entertainment conglomerates rested largely on their control of "authorless," proprietary storywords, was to a significant degree the result of Marvel Studio's groundbreaking success beginning in the last years of the 2000s. A steady string of hits based on Marvel franchises, most notably the Spider-Man film series, had convinced Marvel Studios to begin making their own movies, translating their superhero-centered universe to film.

In doing so, they relied upon an intensified version of the comic book poetics that had become increasingly popular among filmmakers over the first years of the 2000s.

Franchises driven by comic book poetics were best produced by a standardized, producer-driven creative process, and Marvel Studios provided a model for such a process that the rest of Hollywood was quick to follow. Kevin Feige implemented a system of production strongly reminiscent of the classic Hollywood studio system that had collapsed in the late '50s and early '60s – or to the system that had dominated the comic industry since its inception. The individual, authorial presence of stars, directors and writers was diminished dramatically as Marvel Studios relied upon a factory-like process to create a succession of hits, each conforming to Marvel Studios' particular house style. Hollywood's other major studios quickly copied elements of Marvel's successful production system.

But as Foucault argues, the author figure performs a variety of discursive functions, and many of these functions are extremely useful to studios seeking to maintain a successful storyworld franchise. As the visible impact of traditional sources of authorship diminished, Hollywood worked to develop a new kind of author figure. For many studios, this figure took the form of the universe runner, a single filmmaker who acted as the organizing influence over a sprawling transmedia storyworld franchise. Marvel, however, had a man even better suited to the task. Since the early '60s, Stan Lee had been working to establish himself as the Marvel universe's dominant authorial presence. In the late 2000s, Marvel Studios would position Lee as the author figure of the emerging Marvel Cinematic Universe, offering a façade of romantic authorship to an industrialized creative system.

The New Marvel Age

Spider-Man was a huge hit. The first theatrical film featuring the hero that Stan Lee and Steve Ditko had created in 1962 was released in May 2002 to positive reviews and packed theatres. By the end

of its run, the Sony picture had grossed over $400,000,000 in America alone, more than enough to make it the highest grossing film of the year. Internationally, the superhero epic's box office take exceeded $820,000,000.[833] These staggering sums didn't even account for the mountains of merchandise the picture encouraged audiences to consume. The film was a watershed for Marvel Studios; *Spider-Man*'s success, coming only two years after the first X-Men feature grossed almost $300,000,000 worldwide, announced to all of Hollywood that audiences were ready to embrace the superhero stories Marvel and DC had been telling for decades.[834] Every studio that had licensed a Marvel property but allowed it to fester in development hell suddenly rushed that property into production.

Even more significantly, there was mounting evidence that audiences were eager to accept the heavily-serialized, continuity-dependent way Marvel and DC told superhero stories. The Matrix franchise, which had just such a narrative approach, had become a genuine cultural phenomenon and was set to release its second installment, *The Matrix Reloaded,* in 2003. What's more, the three films that trailed just behind *Spider-Man* on the list of 2002's highest domestically grossing movies, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones,* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, all featured strong elements of serialization as part of a dedication to establishing the existence of a larger, continuous, highly marketable narrative universe.

Yet Marvel wasn't satisfied. Ron Perelman's willingness to agree to absurdly studio-friendly contracts as Marvel struggled in bankruptcy meant the publisher saw little of the cash their heroes were raking in. In exchange for the Spider-Man rights, Marvel had received only a one-time payment of $10,000,000 and a less-than-4% cut of the gross; the astronomical success of the first two Spider-Man

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[833] "Spider-Man," *Box Office Mojo*, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=spiderman.htm

[834] "X-Men," *Box Office Mojo*, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=xmen.htm

films ultimately rewarded only $62 million to Marvel.[835] In addition, decades of struggles with major studios and outside producers were still fresh in the memories of Marvel's executives. To reap the full rewards of the public's appetite for superhero storytelling, Marvel would have to make their own movies. This was a major step for a Studio which, in 2003, "consisted of a handful of staffers in a small office on Santa Monica Boulevard who were writing script notes for films made by the major studios."[836] The venerable publisher unveiled its bold filmmaking plans at the 2006 San Diego Comic-Con.[837] To finance their films, the publisher set up a half-billion dollar production fund using their most valuable assets as collateral: the licenses for their superheroes. If Marvel's films flopped, they'd lose the film rights to almost all of their recognizable characters.[838]

It was an ambitious plan, devised and spearheaded largely by David Maisel, who had joined Marvel Studios in 2003 as President and COO.[839] Despite the success of several Marvel-based blockbusters, it was also risky; the heroes who had starred in hits at the post-2002 multiplex were Marvel's most continually successful and widely known, Spider-Man and The X-Men. Films based on lesser-known heroes like *The Punisher* (2004), *Daredevil* (2003), and *Elektra* (2005), had proven that Marvel-based films could also underperform, sometimes disastrously. Ike Perlmutter agreed to Maisel's idea that Marvel should make its own films – as long as Marvel didn't have to put up any of the money. Instead, in early 2005 Maisel found funding from Merrill Lynch.[840] Marvel's agreement with Merril

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[835] Waxman c1; Jonathan Bing, "Spidey Suitors Evaded Snare of Rights Snafu," *Variety* Vol. 387, Iss. 1, 20 May-26 May 2002, pg. 5

[836] Kim Masters, "Marvel Studios' Origin Secrets Revealed by Mysterious Founder: History Was 'Rewritten,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, 5 May 2016

[837] Geoff Boucher, *International Comic-Con; Ka-Pow, Spidey!; Marvel Studios Taps Second-String Superheroes to Grab Box Office*, Los Angeles Times, 22 July 2006, pg. e1

[838] Steven Zeitchik, "Comicbook Action," *Variety*, 5 June 2006, pg. 5

[839] Masters

[840] Masters

Lynch saw the publisher assume $525 million in debt in the belief that they could craft hit films around characters no other studio wanted, even on the absurdly generous terms Perelman was offering in the mid-90s. The heroes left in Marvel's stable were, as commentators like the *New York Times* rarely failed to point out, "B-list" and below – characters who were sometimes unable to sustain their own comic book, let alone a mega-budget movie.[841] In fact, Marvel intended to kick off their filmmaking plans with a feature starring the Hulk, a character who had starred in a box office failure only three years earlier. What's more, Marvel was an independent studio and not vertically integrated. As such, it would have to rely on major studio partners to set the marketing budget for their films and to distribute them effectively.[842] No one at Marvel in the mid-2000s needed to be reminded of the potentially calamitous consequences of accruing debt with no plan to pay it back. Still, Maisel was enamored with the idea that, "if Marvel owned its movies [it] could mix characters together as had been done in the comics, 'so that each movie could become a lead-in to the next, and, basically, after the first movie, they're all sequels or quasi-sequels.'"[843]

As the deal was finalized, Avi Arad parted ways with Marvel. The toy designer left the company in 2006 primarily because he felt the publisher was rushing films into production and failing to provide adequate budgets. Ike Perlmutter sided against Arad, and the former toy designer set out on his own.[844] After departing Marvel, Arad founded his own production company, Avi Arad Productions. As an independent producer, Arad was focusing on his first love, toys, and shortly after hanging out his own shingle began preparing a film based on the "Bratz" toy line. Ironically, as Marvel began taking the first tentative steps towards creating their cinematic universe, they farmed out the production of their initial

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[841] Brooks Barnes, "Marvel Strikes While 'Iron' is Hot, *New York Times*, 6 May 2008 , pg e2

[842] Waxman c1

[843] Masters

[844] Waxman c1

two in-house films to Arad's new production company.[845] To handle marketing and distribution, Marvel partnered with vertically-integrated studios Paramount and Universal.

Arad stressed the authenticity Marvel could bring to adaptations of their own characters. Discussing the Hulk, Arad explained that, unlike the Universal film released several years earlier, "this time, we'll make it the Marvel way."[846] Elsewhere, Arad insisted, "unless you buy into the gestalt of what is Marvel and understand the characters and metaphors and treat them as living people, we are not interested…. This is material that has withstood the test of history, and the director and writers have to feel a sense responsibility."[847]

One key element was missing from the Marvel Studio equation – Stan Lee. Although he had cameoed in the first Spider-Man film, the venerable editor remained alienated from Marvel after his contract dispute in the late '90s. Lee's presence and cooperation was central to creating the sense of authenticity that Arad saw as vital to Marvel Studio's films – you couldn't make movies "the Marvel way" without Lee. As *Spider-Man* hit theatres, Columbia Pictures chairwoman Amy Pascal asserted the picture's authenticity by positioning Lee as the project's author, telling reporters, "It all started with Stan Lee…. He created a character who has lived in people's hearts for 40 years."[848] Lee himself was also quick to position himself as *Spider-Man*'s ultimate author, writing an editorial for the *New York Times* entitled none-too-subtly "That's My Spidey." Despite the title, Lee did acknowledge Steve Ditko as the character's co-creator in the essay's first paragraph.[849]

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[845] Paul Bond, "Last Stand at Marvel: Arad Solo," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 1 June 2006

[846] Bond

[847] Borys Kit, "Marvel Outlines Slew of Superhero Projects," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 28 Apr. 2006

[848] Sufia Abdur-Rahmen and Richard Natale, ";Spider-Man' Pulls Crowds Into its Web," *Los Angeles Times* 6 May 2002, c1

[849] Stan Lee, "That's My Spidey," *New York Times,* 3 May 2002

Despite Lee's cheery editorial, *Spider-Man* only served to widen the breech between the comic creator, now almost 80, and Marvel. On November 12, 2002, Lee filed a lawsuit against Marvel, alleging that his lifelong employer had cheated him out of his fair share of the bounty from *Spider-Man*. Lee's 1998 contract granted him 10% of the profits from any films based on Marvel characters, and the suit charged that, "Despite reaping enormous benefits from Mr. Lee's creations, defendants have failed and refused to honor their commitments to him."[850] Marvel, suddenly developing a fondness for Hollywood bookkeeping, claimed it had not actually seen any profits from the film.[851] In early 2005 a U.S. District Court Judge found in Lee's favor, ruling that Lee was owed not only 10% of *Spider-Man's* profits but a portion of film-related-toy sales as well.[852] In April, Marvel settled with Lee; the iconic comic creator received $10,000,000 and relinquished any claims on profits from future Marvel films.[853] Significantly, the deal was announced the same day Marvel signed an 8-year agreement with Paramount under which the major studio agreed to distribute up to 10 Marvel Studio's features.[854] As Marvel prepared to launch its ambitious new filmmaking venture, it brought the authorizing presence of Stan Lee back into the fold.

Marvel Studio's first self-produced film, *Iron Man*, debuted in May 2008 and earned $585,174,222 worldwide, an impressive haul for a film based on one of Marvel's B-list heroes. After the success of *Iron Man*, Marvel became bolder in announcing their ambitious and innovative new plans for replicating the comic books' shared universe in film and other media. In mid-2008, the company announced plans for several more films featuring heroes who would eventually join forces as *The*

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[850] "Comic Creator Stan Lee Sues Marvel Over Movie Profits," *USA Today* 13 Nov. 2002

[851] "Comic Creator Stan Lee Sues Marvel Over Movie Profits"

[852] Pamela McClintlock, "Judge Jabs Marvel," *Daily Variety* 20 Jan. 2005.

[853] "Marvel Settles With Lee," *Los Angeles Times* 29 Apr. 2005

[854] Pamela McClintlock, "Marvel Touts Par's Hero Worship," *Daily Variety* 29 Apr. 2005

Avengers, a film originally slated for a 2011 release.[855] Marvel itself was about to join forces with another industry powerhouse, closing the book on its brief run as an independent studio.

Perhaps more than any other Hollywood executive, Walt Disney Company Chairman and CEO Bob Iger understood the value of transmedia storyworlds. Over Bob Iger's tenure at Disney, he had moved aggressively to add to Disney's already impressive roster of franchiseable intellectual properties. In 2006, he purchased the critically-acclaimed animation house Pixar, and in 2012 he spent a staggering $4.05 billion to buy Lucasfilm and its expansive Indiana Jones and Star Wars storyworlds. No single purchase defined his time at the head of the Disney Company more than his 2009 acquisition of Marvel and its pantheon of heroes. After failed marriages with New World and Ronald Perelman, the venerable publisher was finally part of a vertically- and horizontally-integrated entertainment conglomerate with the resources and inclination to fully exploit its intellectual properties.

While Marvel's Hollywood endeavors thrived at long last, its comic publishing operation had stabilized after the chaos of the '90s. The artist-driven auteur movement had broken itself on the chaos of the comic industry's near collapse. Just as the director-driven cinema of '70s Hollywood had taken down United Artists in its death throes, the excesses of artists like Todd McFarlane had nearly brought the entire world of comic publishing down around their heads. Editors bore an equal share of the blame for the turmoil of the mid-90s, and their excesses had been reined in as well. Mega-crossovers still occurred, but the publishers made efforts to limit their number and contain their impact on the creative direction of ongoing series. In 2000, Joe Quesada became Editor-in-Chief of Marvel. Primarily an artist by trade, Quesada found a solution to the twin trends of the '90s of which Lee surely approved: he emphasized writing. Quesada's strategy was to "focus on writers first, and then bring in the artists." When he stepped down in 2011 to take up a new role as the company's Chief Creative Officer, Quesada had become the

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[855] Barnes e2

longest serving Marvel Editor-in-Chief since Lee turned his attention to Hollywood nearly 40 years earlier.[856]

Paging through the books Marvel published during the reign of Quesada and his successor Axel Alonso, the company's Hollywood efforts are evident but not overwhelming. Prominent film and television creators would occasionally join a comic creative team to produce a high-profile superhero storyline. Kevin Smith wrote *Daredevil* and Joss Whedon wrote *The X-Men* and *Runaways*. At rival DC, Richard Donner co-wrote several issues of *Superman* and Kevin Smith followed up his success at Marvel with a run on *Batman*. The involvement of high profile film and television creators in the comic industry was a reminder of DC and Marvel's place in a transmedia empire and their publications' role as one more manifestation of a corporately controlled storyworld. Creative personnel went the other way as well – as Jon Favreau prepared to shoot the first Iron Man film, Quesada and Alonso were called in as creative consultants.[857]

The most obvious nod to the company's big-screen pursuits was the founding of the Ultimate Universe in 2000. This new series of books updated the company's heroes for modern sensibilities and started their stories over again, shedding decades of continuity. The line was designed to offer audiences excited by the upcoming X-Men and Spider-Man films a way to jump into comics without having to brush up on 50 years of fictional history.[858] The new universe also gave creators a place to try out concepts and variations on characters and themes for possible inclusion in future films. Nick Fury, for instance, was no longer the white World War II veteran created by Lee, Kirby and their colleagues but a superspy who happened to look exactly like actor Samuel L. Jackson. Six years after the character first

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[856] Dave Itzkoff, "Modern Marvel," *New York Times*, 27 March 2011, art

[857] Itzkoff art

[858] Gavin Jasper, "The Rise and Fall of the Ultimate Universe," *Den of Geek*, 7 Apr. 2015, http://www.denofgeek.com/us/books-comics/ultimate-marvel/243438/rise-fall-ultimate-marvel-universe-hulk-spiderman-deadpool-marvel-comics

appeared, Jackson himself stepped into the role for the first Iron Man film. Many of the MCU features mix elements from the Ultimate and traditional universes – the movie-based character of Hawkeye, for one, wears his Ultimate counterpart's uniform but exhibits a jocular, every-man personality that is far closer to his portrayal in the original Marvel universe. In 2015, the Ultimate Universe had become so laden with backstory that it could no longer serve its original purpose. Marvel wiped the universe from existence in a mega-event – carefully moving any marketable characters into the main comic continuity.

Outside of the Ultimate Universe, Marvel's books trundled on much as before. When a character was set to appear in a film, he or she might star in a few more titles than normal. Some elements of the comic universe were altered – with comfortably convoluted in-universe explanations – to be more in line with their film or television counterparts. Agent Phil Coulson, who became a fan favorite after debuting in 2008's *Iron Man*, quickly found his way into the comic universe. For the most part, though, the changes were minor. Now a small part of a globe-spanning media empire, Marvel could afford to sell its miniscule number of comics to the same readers each month without fear of collapse. The comic books were now less a profit-making endeavor then a place to try out new ideas that might feature in billion-dollar blockbusters. As Kevin Feige explained, "it's a hell of a lot less expensive to take a chance in a comic than it is [to] take a chance in a movie."[859]

Rise of the Storyverses

Marvel's 2008 announcement that their planned films would construct a cinematic storyverse capped by *The Avengers* was a formal acknowledgement that they were bringing the deep seriality and

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[859] Itzkoff art

complex horizontal and vertical continuity of comic poetics to blockbuster filmmaking. It was a significant development, but it should have come as no shock to anyone who had been watching trends in big-budget filmmaking since 2000. Hollywood had been inching towards comic book poetics for a decade, but the success of Marvel's approach would crystalize those pre-existing tendencies into a new paradigm for blockbuster filmmaking.

Hollywood had tentatively experimented with serialization long before the dawn of the 21st century. Sequel hooks, usually vague assurances that a character would reappear in future series installments, were fairly common, particularly in horror films. Such markers might include the familiar hint that the slasher was not fully dead, as in the disappearance of Michael Myer's corpse at the end of *Halloween* (1978) or Jason exploding from the lake in the final frames of *Friday the 13th* (1980). At their most literal, these markers included written assurances at the end of the credits that a character would be back – the familiar declaration that "James Bond will return," a device that Marvel itself has cheekily adopted. Ultimately, these indications of serialization were little more than stingers attached to films that otherwise closely followed familiar Hollywood storytelling tropes; the villain is defeated, true love triumphs, and all plot threads established in the first act are resolved as the credits role.

A very few 20th century releases included more detailed markers for future episodes, often in the form of unresolved plot threads that gestured at future storylines. When the first Star Wars and Back to the Future movies were blockbusters and their respective creators were relatively certain of being allowed to complete a full trilogy of films, comic-like cliffhanger endings were added to the second entry in each series. This practice was unusual enough that it occasioned a significant audience backlash against *Back to the Future 2* (1989), which was perceived to have been particularly guilty of failing to give viewers the story resolution they had paid for. The Matrix series adopted a similar pattern; the first film featured a fairly traditionally constructed narrative which resolves most of the issues it raises within its two-hour runtime. The second film in the trilogy, 2003's *The Matrix Reloaded*, is heavily serialized, with numerous plot threads left to be resolved in the concluding chapter, *The Matrix Revolutions*, released the

same year. As Henry Jenkins has explored, both these films also pointed towards the existence of a larger, over-arching narrative universe by introducing tangential plotlines and backstories that were continued in the video games, comics, DVDs, and other ancillary media that emerged from the Matrix universe. It is worth noting that many of the films which utilized serialized poetics prior to their proliferation throughout Hollywood in the mid- to late 2000s had strong connections to the comic book industry. The Wachowskis were heavily influenced by Japanese comics, and Lucasfilm partnered with Marvel to develop the Star Wars storyworld before the first film in the series ever came out.

Even pre-2000 comic book adaptations tended to conform to classic Hollywood storytelling patterns rather than integrating the poetics of their source material. The spate of late-80s/ early-90s superhero films is indicative. 1989's *Batman* definitively kills off the Joker, a cardinal sin in a comic industry in which villains must always be left viable for future storylines. What's more, the film rewrites Batman's origin so that it is the Joker who murders Batman's parents rather than pinning the crime on a faceless mugger who is little more than a physical manifestation of urban decay. The Joker's death thus resolves Batman's story as well, completing his psychological arc and robbing him of personal motivation to fight crime. This development is reflected in the odd sequel *Batman Returns*, which focuses on the psychological journey of villains The Penguin and Catwoman and renders Batman himself little more than a supporting character. This premature narrative closure is not unique to the Batman series; *The Rocketeer* similarly concludes with the rocket pack destroyed and the hero happy and disinclined to undertake any further adventures.

Post-2000 comic book films began to import elements of comic book poetics only gradually. Sony's *Spider-Man* established a pattern which would become standard for Hollywood blockbusters. The picture introduces an A-plot focused on Spider-Man's conflict with the villainous Green Goblin and a romantic B-plot which follows the tentative courtship between Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson. The film follows the hero's conflict with the Goblin to its conclusion; following a dramatic final confrontation that includes an obligatory gesture to the landmark story "The Night Gwen Stacy Died," the villain is

fatally impaled on his own hoverboard. The film would seem to be repeating the same act of narrative

closure as 1989's *Batman*, but placing the film in conversation with the comic books that inspired it

reveals that the Goblin's death carries far different connotations. The Green Goblin has died in several

high-profile comic storylines, each time returning thanks to the impermanence of comic book death.

What's more, the mantle of the Green Goblin has been assumed by numerous characters, one of whom,

Parker's friend Norman Osborne, is included in the film. *Spider-Man* is thus able to offer audiences a

sense of resolution while still signaling to comic-savvy viewers that the Green Goblin remains a viable

component of future plotlines. The film's romantic B-plot concludes with much more explicit narrative

openness; Parker, burdened by his new abilities, refuses a kiss from Mary Jane and walks forlornly

towards the camera. Unlike the A-plot, the B-plot is left unresolved in a manner that all audience

members can understand as a gesture towards future storylines. Many 21st century blockbusters would

follow a similar pattern, resolving the immediate hero/villain conflict but leaving romantic or other

interpersonal plotlines open.

Death of the Auteur

Heavily serialized, continuity rich storyworlds such as those featured in superhero comics

undermine individual authorship by lending themselves to an editorially-driven collaborative process of

creation. We have already seen the degree to which any single comic is the product of several

collaborators working in close cooperation. When we expand our view to encompass the entirety of a

character's history as the authored work, the act of creation becomes even more diffuse. This fact can be

illustrated by an examination of the character of Spider-Man as he was presented in the 2002 *Spider-Man*,

one of the formative films of Hollywood's current comic book cinema paradigm.

In later years, Lee would claim to have created Spider-Man entirely on his own, though his purported motivation changed based on his mood when telling the story: he took his inspiration either from a pulp hero named The Spider or from an actual spider he spotted shortly before the moment of creation. In fact, in early 1962 Lee approached Jack Kirby about creating a teenage superhero with spider powers. This was not new ground for the veteran artist, who in 1959 had created a hero known as The Fly with his former partner Joe Simon. Lee and Kirby began to develop the story of a teen living with his Aunt and Uncle who was given spider powers by a scientific mishap. Lee then gave the scenario he had created with Kirby to artist Steve Ditko, who developed Spidey's iconic costume and the put-upon nerd appearance of Peter Parker. Kirby then produced the cover for the finished story.[860]

The 2002 Spider-Man pulls from far more than the first comic story featuring Spider-Man. The film's villain is Spider-Man's arch-nemesis The Green Goblin, the alter ego of industrialist Norman Osborne. Both the Goblin and Osborne were created primarily by Lee and Ditko, but the fact that they were one and the same person was a point of much contention between the two men. Lee felt the mysterious villain should be unmasked as someone the audience had already met while Ditko felt such a revelation would make the comic's world seem absurdly small, instead favoring the creation of a new character behind the Goblin's mask. In 1966, when it became clear Lee intended to exert his editorial prerogative, Ditko became the first creator involved in the Marvel Revolution to quit the company. Lee quickly brought in the more agreeable John Romita Sr. as the book's artist, and in Romita's first issue revealed Osborne's secret life as the Goblin.

Peter Parker's love interest, Mary Jane Watson, was created by Romita and Lee. Romita had a reputation as being particularly good at drawing attractive women, so the creative team decided to add the supermodel character into the storyline. The film's version of Mary Jane is an amalgamation of that

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[860] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 94

character with an earlier Parker romantic partner, Gwen Stacey. Mary Jane, a more care-free character in the comics, is given Stacey's more down-to-earth personality in the film. More importantly, she is also given Stacey's iconic fall off the Brooklyn Bridge.

As discussed in chapter 3, Stacey's fall was a key moment in the comic industry's appeal to older audiences and a natural progression of the "realism" Lee and his colleagues had infused into their books. "The Night Gwen Stacy Died" was the featured story in *Amazing Spider-Man* 121, cover-dated June 1973, created by John Romita and Gerry Conway. The idea of killing off a major female character was far from original in comics. The moment was inspired by Milton Caniff, creator of the newspaper strip *Terry and the Pirates*.[861] Romita explains, "Caniff used to take very important female characters… and knock them off regularly every four or five years."[862] Characters had died in comic books before, but never one as prominent as Stacy. According to Conway, Romita, and Editor-in-Chief Roy Thomas, the story development took place with Lee's full knowledge, approval, and even input. When Lee was confronted during his college tours by crowds of angry fans, however, he quickly decided that he had been out of town during the production meetings at which the death was plotted and was appropriately appalled when he saw the offending book.[863]

Lee's trepidation about Gwen Stacy's death brings up another, oft forgotten component of the comic creative process – the fans. Fan input into comic book storyworlds is, of course, far less immediate and direct then that exercised by the creators themselves. More than in any other culture industry,

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[861] The practice of killing female characters to provide motivation or character development for male heroes has been identified by Feminist critics as a key example of how comics and other media regularly value female characters less than their male counterparts, reducing them to the level of inhuman plot device and casually subjecting them to horrific violence. Comic writer Gail Simone has dubbed the practice "fridging," referencing a particular egregious example in which DC's Green Lantern discovers his dismembered girlfriend stacked in his refrigerator.

[862] Dan Johnson, "Gerry Conway and John Romita Sr. Discuss The Green Goblin's Last Stand!" *Back Issue* No. 17, September 2006

[863] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 152

however, fan reactions exert a definite influence on the direction of superhero characters and the universe of which they are part. This is largely a product of the small size and insularity of the comic community since the advent of the direct markets. Comic creators interact with fans more frequently than their counterparts in other media, engaging with them through internet and traditional correspondence and meeting with them face-to-face at conventions. The boundaries between fan and creator are also far more porous in the comic community then in other culture industries: as we have seen, a surprising number of the fans whose letters were featured in Marvel's comics in the '60s went on to become major creators in their own right, a situation that pertains to this day. Fan input into a character's creative direction is most often negative in character, manifesting in the rejection of a story element or aspect of character growth. In the case of Spider-Man, for instance, The Clone Saga, an infamous storyline produced during the darkest days of Marvel's bankruptcy struggle, attempted to make major changes to the character's backstory that were roundly rejected by fans. The storyline, which began in *Web of Spider-Man* 117 (October 1994), ran for a staggering two years as creators desperately attempted to disentangle the increasingly convoluted narrative.

In 1973, writer Gerry Conway had followed the death of Gwen Stacy with the introduction of a new villain, the Jackal, who was infatuated with the young woman. In his grief, the Jackal manufactures clones of both Spider-Man and Stacy, and after a series of battles the clone of the superhero perishes in an explosion. The storyline was largely forgotten until the '90s, which saw a spate of editorial-driven replacements of established heroes with more violent new versions. Reacting to this trend and desperately attempting to save a company that seemed doomed, Marvel's creators revived Spider-Man's 1973 clone and revealed he had gone into hiding using the assumed name Ben Reilly. Genetic tests revealed that, during the confusion two decades earlier, Parker and Reilly had switched places, and the character who had been Spider-Man in the interim was actually the clone and Reilly the original. Peter retires and is replaced by Reilly as the universe's primary Spider-Man. The outpouring of negative fan reaction to this development was swift and extensive. Marvel's creators reacted quickly, and a

development that was intended to change the character of Spider-Man permanently was almost immediately undone, in large part because of fan outrage. Peter Parker returned to the role of Spider-Man, and the creators of the 2002 film never even considered the idea that any other character would don the red and blue leotards.

The above discussion gives some impression of the degree to which any single character within a heavily serialized storyworld is the product of the collaboration of numerous creators. This situation is only compounded if we widen our gaze and consider the entirety of the narrative universe as the work being authored. As film and other culture industries have adopted comic book poetics, traditional ideas of authorship have been destabilized. If a franchise is successful, it is almost unprecedented for a single director to be attached to every film in a series and still more rare for one creator to be involved, even to a minor extent, in the production of every text related to a transmedia universe. The idea of a storyworld auteur, understood in the traditional sense, becomes untenable. Certain filmmakers have had extensive relationships with a franchise – Michael Bay with Transformers and Zach Snyder with the DC universe, for instance – but eventually their involvement came to an end while the storyworld endured. The creators who came the closest to overseeing an entire storyworld, the Wachowskis, were among the earliest to attempt to construct a comic style universe. Ultimately, however, their Matrix universe exhibited a fatal flaw that damned it in the eyes of studio executives – it ended. This leads to the second motivation behind the adoption of comic book creative practices: in the eyes of the corporate owners of storyworld IPs, not only is it nearly impossible for a single creator to plausibly author every iteration of a universe, it is also undesirable. No creator or group of creators must ever become associated with a work to such a degree that their involvement is viewed as an essential element of authorization by audiences.

When Marvel set out in 2007 to create a series of films which emulated the complex poetics found in superheroes comic book, they began to evolve a collaborative creative process adapted to that narrative form. Marvel established a "creative committee" rather than hire producers for each of their planned movies. The committee included Marvel Studios head of production Kevin Feige, Marvel Studios co-president Louis D'Esposito, president of publishing Dan Buckley, former Editor-in-Chief and current chief creative officer Joe Quesada, and prolific comic scribe Brian Michael Bendis. Marvel Entertainment president Alan Fine oversaw the group. The committee made most of the major – and many of the minor – decisions that drove the Marvel universe. It was the committee, not a writer, director, or other, traditional, creator that decided to set the first Captain America film in the 1940s despite fears it would alienate the audience and to retain Iron Man's comic book origin after decades of drafts at New Line Studio had tried to alter it.

When preparing a film, the committee compiled a "lookbook" of concepts and artwork illustrating their approach to the material. Prospective directors were given a sense of how the committee wanted a film to be shaped, sometimes by being given access to the lookbook or presented with the committee's thoughts on the project. In 2016, Feige explained a particular iteration of the process in terms designed to preserve as much of an impression of directorial input as possible: "So on Thor: Ragnarok for instance, we shared with filmmakers the ten different ideas that we had for the movie, and that was not a movie, but was just sort of blue-sky thoughts."[864] The directors then offered their pitch for the material. After the committee has selected a director, writers were attached to the process. These

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[864] Peter Sciretta, "Kevin Feige on How a Marvel Movie Like 'Doctor Strange' is Developed, & Why Time Travel Won't Ruin the MCU," *SlashFilm*, 4 Nov. 2016, http://www.slashfilm.com/kevin-feige-doctor-strange-interview/

writers were often joined by the film's director and assorted Marvel executives as they developed the details of the film's plot. According to *Captain America: Civil War*, *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) scribes Stephen McFeely and Christopher Markus, this crowded writing process makes "the process of developing a Marvel movie similar to the process of breaking a story in a TV writers' room."[865] During an initial brainstorming session that usually lasts a couple months, this group builds on the creative committee's ideas and develops an assortment of story ideas. As the screenwriters translate these ideas into a script, they are often forced to deal with problems stemming from the nature of Marvel's shared universe and the scattered status of its intellectual properties, adding or removing characters or plot elements as corporate agreements are signed or fall through. In addition, all of the writers developing a particular project must maintain constant contact with their counterparts on Marvel's other films to maintain the continuity of the universe and avoid contradictions and conflicts.[866] This often involves frequent rewriting to make sure the disparate scripts fit together properly.[867] Feige's input is nearly constant – Markus offers an example of the back-and-forth writers engage in with the producer: "we say, 'OK, there's gonna be this big fight with these three people in it,' Kevin [Feige] will come back and say 'You know what I want to see? I want to see Ant-Man inside Iron Man's costume,' or something like that."[868] The committee enlists as many screenwriters as it feels necessary, bringing them

[865] Peter Suderman, "How Marvel Built Such an Impressive Movie Universe," *Vox*, 9 May 2016, https://www.vox.com/2016/5/9/11595344/marvel-cinematic-universe-captain-america-avengers

[866] Suderman

[867] Bryan Bishop, "The Writers of Captain America: Civil War on Building the Future of the Marvel Universe," *The Verge*, 10 May 2016, https://www.theverge.com/2016/5/10/11650970/captain-america-civil-war-marvel-christopher-markus-stephen-mcfeely-interview

[868] Bishop

in as late as post-production, as it did in the case of Dan Harmon during the making of *Dr. Strange* (2016).[869]

This deeply and explicitly collaborative process has drawn significant criticism from critics who favor a more romantic conception of authorship. Much of this criticism is couched in the same mechanistic terms that confounded Lee in the 1950s. One article illustrates the typical tone of such complaints, opening, "even for a beloved and widely respected director living out his ultimate dream job…, it might be impossible to survive the Marvel Studios machine intact."[870] Kevin Feige himself neatly summarizes this critique of the production process he heads when he explains that the studio has sought to diminish the impression that, "each Marvel movie is a sausage, the recipe of which is handed to a director, then the parts are churned through a machine of studio notes, fattened up with threads that connect each film in the universe to each other, and sanded down to ensure global appeal."[871]

Veterans of Marvel Studio's creative process are eager to counter this depiction of Marvel's creative process by emphasizing the degree of artistic autonomy at every step in the process. Screenwriter Stephen McFeely claims, "We feel a great deal of ownership over these characters… and we feel that we have a great deal of input"[872] In a fascinating inversion of the traditional link between collaborative creation and soulless mechanization, McFeely and fellow Marvel screenwriter Christopher Marcus depict cooperation as reintroducing humanity into the creative process:

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[869] Peter Sciretta, Kevin Feige on How a Marvel Movie Like 'Doctor Strange' is Developed, & Why Time Travel Won't Ruin the MCU, *SlashFilm*, 4 Nov. 2016, http://www.slashfilm.com/kevin-feige-doctor-strange-interview/

[870] Adam B. Vary, Joss Whedon's Astonishing, Spine-Tingling, Soul-Crushing Marvel Adventure!, *BuzzFeed News*, 20 Apr. 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/adambvary/joss-whedon-spine-tingling-soul-crushing-marvel-adventure?utm_term=.nj1NE1eZO#.aeAXVY9jW

[871] Seth Kelley, "'Gaurdians 2': Why James Gunn is Now the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Biggest Winner," *Variety*, 7 May 2017

[872] Peter Suderman, "How Marvel Built Such an Impressive Movie Universe," *Vox*, 9 May 2016, https://www.vox.com/2016/5/9/11595344/marvel-cinematic-universe-captain-america-avengers

'It's the multiplicity of creators that give it that organic quality,' Markus says, pointing to the diverging tones of the various franchises, from the far-out space opera of Guardians of the Galaxy to the comic clashes of the old and new worlds in the *Thor* films. 'Because otherwise it would be, you know…'

'A factory,' McFeely suggests.

'It would be tonally much more similar,' Markus says.[873]

While Marvel's creative process has retained its uniquely collaborative identity, it has undergone several significant shifts since 2007. After Disney acquired Marvel, Disney CEO Bob Iger claimed final say on all creative decisions, but the committee remained the main architect of the cinematic version of the universe Lee and his collaborators had birthed nearly 50 years earlier.[874] In 2015, Kevin Feige, increasingly tired of Ike Perlmutter's interference, arranged with Iger to have Marvel Studios removed from Perlmutter's control. The shift also marked the end of the "creative committee," with 2016's *Doctor Strange* the final film developed under its purview. In its place, all creative decisions are made by Feige, D'Esposito, and Marvel's head of production Victoria Alonso.[875]

The system Marvel Studios eventually established to create their films bears striking similarities to the classic Hollywood system that dominated American filmmaking from the '20s through the '40s. Marvel Studios features a producer-based method of film production, with Kevin Feige occupying a position akin to that held by figures like Daryl Zanuck at Fox or Irving Thalberg at MGM, overseeing every aspect of production and setting the guidelines that define the studio's carefully developed division

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[873] Suderman

[874] Devin Leonard, "The Pow! Bang! Bam! Plan to Save Marvel, Starring B-List Heroes," *Bloomberg*, 3 April 2014, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-04-03/kevin-feige-marvels-superhero-at-running-movie-franchises

[875] Devin Faraci, The Marvel Creative Committee is Over, *Birth. Movies. Death.*, 2 Sept. 2015, http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2015/09/02/the-marvel-creative-committee-is-over

of labor. The system intentionally diminishes the power of roles traditionally understood as authorial, like stars, writers, and directors. Every aspect of Marvel's production process is standardized, from scriptwriting to color correction. The result, as it was in the studio era, is a string of well-produced but aesthetically and tonally similar films distinguished from one another by slight variations on a familiar formula. It is the system Lee modeled in his *The Monster Makers*, and it powers the most consistently successful studio of the 21st century.

<div align="center">

Collaborators

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The new Marvel Manner decreases the individual creative control granted to those members of a film production - stars, directors, and writers – who industrial and popular discourses typically depict as the authors of a film. In the '80s and '90s, studios sought to attach prominent directors with distinctive styles to blockbuster properties. Directors like Tony and Ridley Scott, Steven Spielberg, and James Cameron were viewed as pre-sold elements that could be added to stars and popular intellectual properties to help sell a film. Audiences and executives expected the completed films to bear the signs of the director's authorship, to deliver on the promise made by their name on the marquee. *Batman* and the small group of superhero films that followed it including *Darkman*, *Dick Tracy*, and *The Crow*, illustrate this earlier form of blockbuster filmmaking. Many of these films are strikingly visually distinct when compared to the torrent of comic-book cinema that flooded theatres after the turn-of-the-century, suggesting the input of a single, authoritative creative voice. Sam Raimi's *Darkman*, an original hero created when Raimi was unable to secure the rights to Batman or The Shadow, may serve as an example. The film is full of Raimi's extremely distinct visual style – dutch angles, campy, intentionally awful special effects, heavily shaded tight close-ups, snap zooms and other showy, fluid, frequent camera moves

All of these familiar markings make the film recognizably "Sam Raimi's *Darkman*" in a way that, for instance, a later Marvel Studios film never reads as "Scott Derrickson's *Doctor Strange*."

The first half of the 2000s saw a resurgence of this brand of quasi-auteurist superhero cinema, as Hollywood attempted to unite its fascination with comic book properties and emerging interest in comic book poetics with a view of film authorship that dated back to the '60s and '70s. This period produced a number of superhero films baring the imprint of directors associated with a distinctive visual style, including Guillermo Del Toro's *Blade II* (2002), *Hellboy* (2004), and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008), Sam Raimi's Spider-Man series, and Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003). Raimi can once more be seen as emblematic of this period: sequences like Doctor Octopus's murderous awakening in the hospital after the accident that binds him to his tentacles is shot and edited in a manner that is highly reminiscent of moments from Raimi's earlier films, most notably the tree attack in *Evil Dead* (1981) and its sequel. The ostentatious presence of actors associated with the director, most notably friend and perennial leading man Bruce Campbell and brother Ted Raimi, also serve to emphasize Sam Raimi's authorship. This is also a period during which production teams worked to develop a comic-book-film aesthetic that attempted to reproduce the images on the printed page, resulting in visually intriguing comic adaptations like *The Hulk*, *300* (2006), and *Sin City* (2005). This transitional period would draw to a close around 2008, as the success of Marvel Studio's early features convinced filmmakers to move away from a self-conscious "auteurist" or comic-based aesthetic.

Marvel's downplaying of the role of the director did not occur immediately. Media and studio rhetoric regarding the making of *Iron Man*, the first entry in the MCU, positioned director Jon Favreau as a typical auteur. An article in *Variety* explains that Robert Downey Jr.'s casting in the lead role came only at the urging of Favreau, who battled against Marvel's desire for a more mainstream star. The article goes on to explain that in the film, "Favreau sets emotionally real characters in a stylized fantasy universe… Favreau and his writers… replaced the original Vietnam War action with a contemporary setting in Afghanistan… [and] Favreau worked closely with ILM." Even the planned Marvel Universe as

a whole is framed as a product of the director: "Enmeshed in the Marvel universe, Favreau hopes to launch another comicbook series such as 'Captain America,' 'Thor,' or 'The Avengers.'"[876] Lurking in the background of the article, however, are hints of what Marvel will become – Kevin Feige, at the time the studio's head of production, is a constant presence supporting Favreau, fighting by his side for Downey and offering comments which frame Favreau as the ultimate comic fan.

With the success of Marvel's initial slate of features, the studio grew confident in the pre-sold nature of their superhero IPs. As such, the ostentatious presence of prominent directors, once seen as vital to the successful marketing of a blockbuster, is no longer required. Instead, Marvel Studios has established a pattern of hiring directors who can be easily integrated into their collaborative filmmaking process. One source of such directors is television. Creators with a strong background in TV are well-versed in handling a heavily-serialized narrative and are likely to be more used to adapting their personal style to the demands of a creator, producer, or show runner. Marvel has relied heavily on directors including Joss Whedon (*Avengers*, *Avengers Age of Ultron* (2015)), Alan Taylor (*Thor: The Dark World*), and Joe and Anthony Russo (*Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014), *Captain America: Civil War*) whose primary previous experience was on television. Marvel, like many of the other studios attempting to create corporately controlled storyworlds, also has a predilection for hiring directors who have produced a critically acclaimed, small-budget independent film but have little experience in major studio filmmaking, presuming that such individuals will be less inclined to assert their auteurist prerogative and more willing to accept executive interference in the production process. Filmmakers in this category include Taika Waititi (*Thor: Ragnarok*) and Jon Watts (*Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017)).

When Marvel does hire directors with major studio experience, they tend to be individuals without a particularly distinct visual style, adept at creating the invisibility that defined classic Hollywood

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[876] Anne Thompson, "Favreau, Downey Get a Super Boost," *Variety* Vol. 410, Iss. 11 28 Apr.-4 May, 2008, pg. 6

filmmaking. For the auteurists of *Cahiers du Cinema*, these filmmakers would be dismissed (unfairly) as little more than matters en scene, directors who merely frame the work of others. Examples of such directors include Joe Johnston (*Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011)) and Peyton Reed (*Ant-Man* (2015), *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018)). In choosing such directors, Marvel has tended to pick creators with past experience that is in some way thematically relevant to the film being staffed rather than focusing on directors with an aesthetic that might fit the subject matter. Johnston, for instance, seems to have been chosen to direct the World War II superhero adventures of Captain America largely on the strength of his work on *The Rocketeer*, another WW II set superhero epic which had accumulated a dedicated fan following since its initial inauspicious release. Similarly, Kenneth Branagh was invited to direct *Thor* (2011) not because of any experience or aptitude in directing big-budget fantasy-action films but because his reputation as one of his generation's foremost Shakespearians suited him for (and leant credibility to) the picture's exaggerated faux-Shakespearian dialogue. This attempt to bring some pretense of gravitas to comic book material seems to have worked, warranting stories like *Newsweek*'s "Branagh Meets Comic-Book Hero: What Drew a Shakespearean Master to a Blockbuster About Viking Mythology."[877]

There are exceptions to these directorial hiring practices, but when Marvel Studio employs directors with a more distinct personal style it can result in unresolvable conflicts with the studio's deeply collaborative creative process. Edgar Wright serves as a prime example of this phenomenon. Wright, with his intricate use of pop music, frequent tight close-ups, and quick-cut editing for comedic effect, is one of the most visually and aurally distinctive directors working within the industry today. The British filmmaker partnered with Marvel to develop an Ant-Man feature film well before the studio's intricate plans for a mammoth shared cinematic universe had crystallized. Ironically, Wright was drawn to the project largely because of the degree of authorial control it promised. The fact that Ant-Man "is not one

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[877] Chris Lee, "Branagh Meets Comic-Book Hero," *Newsweek* Vol. 157, Iss. 19, 9 May 2011

of those heroes that everyone in the world knows about and will recognize" was "exciting to Wright because it gives him some creative latitude and spares him the intense fan scrutiny that accompanies, say, a Batman or Superman film."[878] In 2006, *Ant-Man* was announced alongside *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* as one of Marvel Studio's first three features, but development was slow and halting. As the production of the feature dragged on, the relationship between Wright and the studio deteriorated until a Marvel-approved rewrite of the screenplay went forward without Wright's knowledge. The writer/director left the project, neatly summing up the studio's attitude towards auteurs: "I wanted to make a Marvel movie, but I don't think they really wanted to make an Edgar Wright movie."[879] The media, both industry and fan, framed the conflict as one between a risk-averse, standardizing studio and an author with a unique voice. As Kevin Feige phrased it, "There were all these stories, the evil studio is crushing dreams and creative visions."[880]

The media has positioned *Guardian of the Galaxy*'s director James Gunn as a counterpoint to the rest of the MCU's directors, the exception that proves the rule. By depicting Gunn as a lone auteurist voice in a series defined by the lack of such artistry, critics emphasize the standardization and lack of authorial vision they feel is found elsewhere in the MCU. Critics understand *Guardians of the Galaxy*'s focus on misanthropic outsiders, heavy use of pop music, grungy yet colorful aesthetic, and the presence of Gunn friend Michael Rooker and brother Sean Gunn in the cast as markers of the director's auteurist credentials. Variety praises the director's ability to avoid the dehumanizing stamp of the Marvel production process: "Gunn infused the first 'Guardians' with enthusiasm, wit, and a singular – and starkly

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[878] Boucher e1

[879] William Hughes, "Edgar Wright Finally Opens Up About Why He Left Ant-Man," *The AV Club*, 24 June 2017, https://news.avclub.com/edgar-wright-finally-opens-up-about-why-he-left-ant-man-1798263342

[880] Gregg Kilday, "Paul Rudd and Marvel's Kevin Feige Reveal 'Ant-Man's' Saga, From Director Shuffle to Screenplay Surgery to Studio's "Phase Three" Plans," *Hollywood Reporte,r* 24 June 2015,

different – vision, that stood apart from other Marvel films."[881] An article in the online journal *Collider* opined, "Now that Joss Whedon has moved on from Marvel, James Gunn is the last 'auteur' voice in the studio, and the one they will point to when they say that they let directors put an imprint on the studio's films."[882] Even mixed reviews of *Guardians* such as the one issued by the Tampa Bay Times, depicted Gunn as thoroughly in control of the "anti-Marvel Marvel movie," writing that "[Gunn] can get away with anything, and that's what he tries, at times too hard."[883]

Marvel and Gunn have labored to perpetuate and reinforce this depiction of the director as an auteur to counter the widespread criticism of Marvel's creativity-killing standardization. *Guardians*' star Chris Pratt is explicit on the subject, explaining, "James Gunn is the auteur. He's the man behind Guardians of the Galaxy. He wrote the movie, he directed the movie…. The first one and the second one. So this is completely his vision."[884] Gunn has consistently minimized the influence Marvel's executives exert over his film, contributing to the idea that he alone among the MCU's directors is producing a film that can be considered the product of a single voice. Asked by the *New York Times* whether Marvel "dictated any plot elements," Gunn replied definitively, "None. Zero."[885]

Gunn's ability to create the appearance of being able to maneuver more freely then his counterparts within the Marvel studio system may have been a result of his unique background at Troma Studios, where he worked in various capacities on several features. Lloyd Kaufman's vertically-

[881] Kelley

[882] Matt Goldberg, "James Gunn is More Concerned with 'Guardians of the Galaxy 2' Than 'Avengers: Infinity War,'" *Collider*, 14 Oct. 2015, http://collider.com/guardians-of-the-galaxy-2-james-gunn-avengers-3-infinity-war/

[883] Steve Persall, "A 'Galaxy' Far, Far Away," *Tampa Bay Times*, 31 July 2014

[884] Oliver Gettell, "Chris Pratt: Guardians of the Galaxy 2 is Bigger and Better in Every Way," *Entertainment Weekly*, 20 Dec. 2016

[885] David Itzkoff, "A Director as Huge as the Galaxy," *The New York Times*, 30 April 2017, pg. 15

integrated[886] independent New York-based studio offers surprising parallels to the far bigger-budget Marvel. Like Marvel, Troma's films tend to share a common aesthetic and tone, a result of founder Lloyd Kaufman's involvement in every picture the studio produces in-house. Troma, inspired by the Marvel comics of the 1960s, sets its films in a shared universe, although Tromaville boasts a far looser continuity then the MCU. Most significantly, the feature which Gunn produced for Troma, *Tromeo and Juliet* (1997), was created in an openly collaborative environment that echoed that found at Marvel or in the classic studio system. Gunn co-wrote and co-directed the feature with Kaufman, ensuring that the project conformed closely to the Troma house style. In Troma, Gunn had found one of the few spaces in the early '90s that could prepare a filmmaker to navigate the standardized, collaborative production process of Marvel Studios. Experience with the aggressively anti-establishment Troma also played a key role in Gunn's ability to establish himself as Marvel's lone auteur; as Lloyd Kaufman put it, "[Gunn's] way above the idiots who make the rest of those mainstream movies. He's an auteur. And he's able to make movies in a really nice way. He's no yes man."[887]

<center>Falling Stars</center>

Just as comic-book cinema has seemingly diminished the importance of creative personnel behind the camera, it has also downplayed the significance of star actors. In certain periods of Hollywood history, such as the agent-driven era of the '50s and '60s or the blockbuster age of the '80s, stars have exerted a significant and publicly understood creative influence on the films in which they appear. In the

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[886] The studio handles its own distribution, mostly via home video.

[887] Jonathan Peltz, "Before 'Guardians of the Galaxy,' There Was 'Tromeo and Juliet,'" *Vice*, 8 May 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/pg7gzn/before-guardians-of-the-galaxy-there-was-tromeo-and-juliet

era of comic-book cinema, as the *Los Angeles Times* writes in the introduction to their first "Franchise Power List," "Hollywood has shifted from a star-based economy to a character-based economy."[888] storyworlds and the characters within them are the draw for audiences and the foundation on which franchises are constructed. The actors inhabiting the role are of diminished importance, something made clear by a senior executive at one of the major studios: "You really don't want to have a movie star," he explains, going on to elaborate that "the films will be hits either way, so why pay more?"[889] This point of view is attested to by the ease with which Marvel replaced actor Terrence Howard in the interval between *Iron Man* and its sequel. When Howard demanded more money, the studio quickly realized that the War Machine character and not the Oscar-nominated actor embodying him was the primary draw for audiences. Comic-book-style franchises tend to make stars rather than buy them, elevating actors like Chris Pratt (Guardians of the Galaxy, Jurassic World) and Jennifer Lawrence (Hunger Games, X-Men) and rehabilitating actors like Robert Downey Jr. (Iron Man) or Vin Diesel (The Fast & The Furious) to the point that other film projects without the benefit of bankable IPs are willing to hand them massive salaries. For those films, bereft of other pre-sold elements, a star may still bolster box office returns, particularly in foreign markets.

The case of Edward Norton and *The Incredible Hulk* offers an even more striking example of how creative power has slipped away from the star in the era of comic book cinema. In 2008, Marvel relaunched the Hulk after a 2003 Universal film featuring the character had failed to rake in the green. The failure of that film was widely attributed to the excessively auteurist presence of director Ang Lee, who filled the film with "comic-like" editing effects while simultaneously focusing on the emotional lives of the characters and their fraught interactions in a style reminiscent of his earlier films such as *The Ice*

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[888] Marc Bernardin, "Marvel, 'Star Wars,' 'Harry Potter' and More: Why the Movie Star No Longer Shines as Bright as the Franchise," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 2016

[889] "Fading Stars," *The Economist*, 27 Feb. 2016

Storm (1997). Marvel replaced lead actor Eric Bana with Ed Norton. Norton was an odd choice for Marvel – he was well-known for attempting to exert creative control over films in which he appeared, a practice which had earned him a reputation as a trouble-maker among industry executives. Still, Marvel had not yet fully refined its character-driven approach to filmmaking, and Norton was both prestigious and popular. In a further practice Marvel would very quickly abandon, they hired Norton to rewrite the script. Acrimony quickly emerged among creators, a fact *The New York Times* and other outlets were quick to report: "Mr. Norton and Marvel, which has the right of final approval on the film, have sparred in recent weeks over trims, among other issues, said studio executives involved."[890] During the dispute, Norton leveraged his star power by threatening not to cooperate with publicity plans if he didn't get his way. Marvel learned their lesson quickly. For the character's next appearance, they recast the Hulk once again. The move set a definitive precedent – at the time, Marvel Studios had only two leads, Robert Downey, Jr. as Iron Man and Norton as The Hulk, and the studio was willing to dismiss the more prominent of the two, banking on the pre-sold nature of the character to compensate for the loss of the star. In the future, Marvel would make sure to seek out actors with less star capital to leverage in the creative process.

One of the most striking echoes of the studio system is the return of long-term, studio-friendly star contracts, a reflection of the increasing primacy of character over performer. After the success of the first Iron Man, lead Robert Downey Jr. was quickly signed to reprise his role in three more films.[891] Downey still retains some star clout – he is one of the few Marvel players who could be replaced only with difficulty – and his contract is nowhere near as studio-friendly as those of some of his colleagues. Samuel L. Jackson, hired to portray superspy Nick Fury, signed an impressive nine-picture deal when he

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890 Brook Barnes, "What's Big and Green, and Desperate to Be a Hit All Over?" *New York Times*, 10 Apr. 2008

891 David Itzkoff, "He is Iron Man, Again and Again," *New York Times*, 30 Oct. 2008 pg. c2

joined the MCU.[892] Chris Evans, who plays heroic geriatric Captain America, initially signed for only $300,000 per picture while Chris Hemsworth received a mere $200,000 for each outing as Thor.[893] The superheroes all received substantial raises by the start of production on *Avengers: Age of Ultron* – largely because Downey was willing to leverage his anomalous star stature to force Marvel to open their pocket book.

The low salaries offered to Marvel's leads also reflect another result of studios' increasing emphasis of character over performer. Marvel has largely eschewed traditional casting practices when looking for actors to fill their hero's tights. Rather than attempting to sign stars with significant box office clout, Marvel has for the most part turned to unknowns or performers who are otherwise undervalued by Hollywood. Downey served as a prototype for such casting practices – when he was signed on as Iron Man, years of high profile relapses into drug addiction had rendered him virtually unemployable. Marvel's attitudes towards stars is in sharp contrast to the days in which Jon Peters scrambled to sign Jack Nicholson to one of the most lucrative contracts in Hollywood history.

The changed attitudes towards star performers is not unique to Marvel. As every studio in Hollywood seeks to develop "evergreen" storyworlds, big-name stars have come to seem less and less vital to blockbuster filmmaking. The sole bright-spot for stars seeking the kind of salaries they routinely received in the 1980s is found in the international market. Producers still feel that overseas audiences flock to see traditional star actors, so the more a studio is banking on the international success of their franchise, the more likely they are to dish out a substantial salary for their leading men and women. Likewise, if a feature is perceived to lack pre-sold elements or if the popularity of its source material is considered shaky, stars might find themselves in a stronger negotiating position. On the whole, however,

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[892] Adam Chitwood, "Samuel L. Jackson Says He Plans to Extend His Marvel Contract," *Collider*, 3 June 2015, http://collider.com/samuel-l-jackson-wants-to-extend-marvel-contract-is-not-in-civil-war/

[893] Kit Simpson Browne, "Wait, The Avengers Made HOW MUCH Less in Their First Roles?," *Movie Pilot*, 11 June 2015, https://moviepilot.com/posts/3296702

actors, like directors, have found themselves reduced to the role of a single collaborator in a much larger creative endeavor.

<center>The Room</center>

The changing status of the screenwriter in Marvel-style creative systems can be illustrated by the emergence, in the years following 2010, of the film writers' room. These rooms drew inspiration from a variety of sources including the authorial units that had been used to guide television series for decades, the wildly successful Pixar "brain trust," and Marvel's collaborative creative process.[894] The writers' room saw a collection of creators, under the command of a head writer, meet regularly and determine the overall direction of a transmedia storyworld and develop stories that can be built into franchise entries in various media. The first explicit writer's room was assembled in late 2014 to steer a universe featuring Universal's classic monsters. Similar rooms emerged quickly, designed to pilot serialized franchises based on King Kong and the Toei Kaiju (Godzilla, Ghidira, Mothra, etc.), various Hasbro toys from the 1980s (G.I.Joe, Micronauts, M.A.S.K., etc.), and the Transformers.

The Transformers writers' room offers an example of this new formation and the rhetoric around it. In 2015, Paramount was troubled because the latest installment of the wildly successful Transformers series, *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014), had seen the lowest domestic returns in franchise history despite enjoying dramatic international success. Seeking to invigorate a flagging storyworld, the studio filled a soundstage with Transformers toys, TVs on which to play the '80s cartoon, and a collection of screenwriters. Akiva Goldsman, the room's head writer, described it as "a work space that is beautifully

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[894] Borys Kit, "Universal's Classic Monster Universe Takes Shape with 'Fargo' and 'Prisoners' Writers," *Hollywood Reporter*, 12 Nov. 2014

production designed to be immersive with a strong sense of franchise history."[895] For the most part, the other writers were men and women who know very little about Transformers but quite a bit about writing films and nurturing storyworlds. The room's inhabitants include *Black Hawk Down* (2001) screenwriter Ken Nolan, Robert Kirkman,[896] comic writer and founder of the Walking Dead media empire, and young screenwriters Geneva Robertson-Dworet, Lindsey Beer, Andrew Barrer, and Gabriel Ferrari. At first glance, Transformers is not a comic-book based property, but Marvel's influence is strong in the modern franchise's DNA – much of the universe's mythos was developed in Marvel comics and Marvel's films provided not only the storyworld structure Paramount sought to emulate but also several of the personnel in the writers' room, including veteran Marvel movie scribes Zak Penn, Art Marcum, Matt Holloway, and Jeff Pinkner. It is common for these newly emerging writers' rooms to share personnel, and Goldsman explained the links between the various franchise's creative staffs: "There are good rooms around town, including the Monsters Room at Universal, the Star Wars room, and of course, at Marvel. We're trying to beg, borrow and steal from the best of them, and gathered a group of folks interested in developing and broadening this franchise."[897] As Goldsman suggests, the composition of the Transformers room is typical of such entities. Goldsman himself is also overseeing the Hasbro writing room, which includes an assortment of Marvel veterans, one or two comic writers, a few screenwriters without extensive comic-book movie experience, a sampling of writers with a background in the serialized medium of television, and Pulitzer-Prize winner Michael Chabon.

The assembled Transformers creators were treated to a two-day crash course in the franchise's history across multiple media, including TV, film, and comics. The group brain-stormed over-arching

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[895] Mike Fleming Jr., "Akiva Goldsman Explains 'Transformers' Writers Room as Paramount Adds Scribe Pair," *Hotline*, 4 June 2015, http://deadline.com/2015/06/transformers-akiva-goldsman-writers-room-michael-bay-paramount-1201438017/

[896] Kirkman was only in the room for a limited time before leaving for medical reasons.

[897] "'Transformers' Writers Room as Paramount Adds Scribe Pair".

storylines within the universes, with key moments translated into images by artists on hand for the purpose. The writers then chose bits of the larger narrative that interested them and went off, individually or in pairs, to write treatments. These proposals were then pitched to a number of stakeholders in the Transformers universe, including director Michael Bay, producers Steven Spielberg and Lorenzo di Bonaventura, and the President of Paramount's Motion Picture Group, Marc Evans. One of these proposals became *Transformers: The Last Knight* (2017), written by Goldsman and filled with hints about other potential projects developed in the room. Other proposals became a planned spin-off focusing on the character Bumblebee and an animated prequel set on the Transformers homeworld of Cybertron.[898] Spielberg felt that at least two of the six other proposals had potential, and contractually he and the other producers have three years in which to give each proposal's authors the greenlight to produce a complete script.[899] Perhaps just as important as the proposals themselves, the room produced a Bible that would help creators maintain consistency and continuity across installments. Director Michael Bay explained the value of such a document: "we're doing one movie, then the next movie, then the next movie, and it's hard. We need a Bible where we can start really taking what we've done. Now, they write down all that we've done and try to meld it."[900]

Gone is much of the romantic rhetoric depicting the author's output as the product of his innermost soul. One of the Hasbro room's members, Michael Chabon, positively contrasts the writers' room with the more traditional ideal of authorship as a process of reflection and self-expression: "Getting out of my room and getting out of my head was a great change of pace." Goldsman similarly positioned the room in opposition to the image of the writer as isolated and tormented, claiming that in the room, "It

[898] Ben Fritz, "Film Studios Recast Writers' Rooms," *Wall Street Journal*, 13 Oct. 2016

[899] Mike Fleming Jr., "'Transformers' Writers Room Wraps," *Deadline*, 17 Sept. 2015
http://deadline.com/2015/09/transformers-writers-room-akiva-goldsman-transformers-5-1201531918/

[900] Ben Kendreick, "Transformers Writers Room Inspired Michael Bay to Return for Last Knight," *Screenrant*, 5 Dec. 2016, https://screenrant.com/transformers-5-last-knight-michael-bay-returning-reason/

was actually fun to be a writer." In place of more familiar metaphors for authorship, head writer Akiva Goldsman couched the creative process in utilitarian terms, depicting the various writers as skilled craftsmen involved in an explicitly collaborative process: "We are architects, hired to design universes and create mythology and then give you the plans"[901] Elsewhere, Goldsman used an even less traditionally artistic metaphor, declaring, "We will be innovative miners, and we will have fun and get to do what we imagined this was all about when we were kids."[902]

Film fans and media critics were less sanguine about the rise of the writer's room. Fan-critic Drew McWeeny mourned the loss of the lone auteur, writing "Many of the things we love in pop culture started with one person sitting in a room in front of a blank piece of paper dreaming as hard as they possibly could. More and more, franchise films are turning to this idea of the creative committee."[903] Similarly, *Collider* lamented that the new method of developing scripts "makes the writer/producer (i.e. Showrunner) king and the director a bit of a hired hand – same as in television."[904]

The Corporate Presence

With the diminishment of traditional sources of authorship in comic book cinema has come a reassertion of corporate ownership and corporate authorship within the text and paratext. In the heyday of

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[901] Fritz

[902] "'Transformers' Writers Room as Paramount Adds Scribe Pair"

[903] Drew McWeeny, "What the 'Transformers' Writers Room Means About the New Shape of Hollywood," *Uproxx*, 20 May 2015, http://uproxx.com/hitfix/what-the-transformers-writers-room-means-about-the-new-shape-of-hollywood/

[904] Adam Chitwood, Universal Assembles "Writer's Room for Cinematic Monster Universe," *Collider*, 12 Nov. 2014, http://collider.com/universal-monster-movie-universe-wolfman-reboot/

the studio system, each major studio specialized in a group of specific star-genre combinations that allowed knowledgeable audiences to discern a film's corporate author from its contents. Warner Bros., for instance, specialized in gritty gangster films starring James Cagney or Edward G. Robinson, melodramas headlined by Bette Davis, and Errol Flynn swashbucklers. When the system collapsed, so did the industrial structures which inscribed a film's corporate owner within the text. In the '80s, even the most knowledgeable viewer would be unable to determine which studio was involved simply by watching the film.[905] Timothy Corrigan has argued convincingly that one of the reasons auteurism became so influential in late 1960s and early 1970s Hollywood is that, as the individualized identities of the different studios disappeared in the collapse of the studio system, producers needed to find a new way to mark films, to let audiences know what to expect and to convince them to buy a ticket. The name of the director came to fulfill this role.[906] Comic book filmmaking has caused the name of the director to once more fade in importance compared to the name of the studio.

Marks of corporate ownership and, by extension, authorship have always been present in media that relied on serialized narrative storyworlds. Even the most casual comic readers are aware which major characters belong to DC and which to Marvel and understand that, outside of exceptional circumstances, these characters may never meet. Lee heightened and played off this awareness in the Marvel paratext, parodying and sniping at the "distinguished competition." Both DC and Marvel produced stories mocking the rival company's output and each introduced thinly-veiled versions of the other publisher's heroes. Marvel's version of the DC pantheon, the Squadron Supreme, featured in several critically acclaimed mini- and ongoing series. The fate of real-world corporations sometimes became a key component of the fictional universe's narrative. As comic publishers like Charleston and

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[905] The exception to this rule is Disney animation, which established and maintained a consistent style and was aided by a lack of significant competition for most of the 20th century.

[906] Timothy Corrigan, "The Commerce of Auteurism," Film and Authorship, ed. Virginia Wright Wexman (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2003)

Quality went out of business, DC purchased their superheroes and integrated them into the DC storyworld, sometimes maintaining their distinctiveness and preserving narrative elements that clashed with DC canon by placing the characters in parallel universes that nevertheless allowed for frequent guest appearances in the primary DC universe. Corporate ownership was also a key element of fandom, with readers dividing into camps and declaring themselves "Marvel maniacs" or "DC zombies." It is hard to imagine fans of other media similarly declaring their allegiance to specific corporations – few film fans in the '90s, for instance, would have defined themselves as fans of Columbia Studios.

In post-2002 Hollywood, corporate authorship has once more emerged as an organizing principle of discourse regarding blockbuster films. In some specific cases, most notably in relation to the films of the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) and MCU, this is because certain elements of production have become standardized. In general, the reemergence is because of the rise of the corporately-owned storyworld as the primary product of the culture industry. Even many casual fans are aware that Batman belongs to DC and his films will thus be produced by Warner Bros.. Pirates of the Caribbean is unmistakably a Disney brand, originating as one of the most famous attractions featured at the Disney theme parks.[907] A smaller but still considerable number of audience members are aware that Transformers is a Paramount product or that Harry Potter films are produced by Warner Brothers.

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[907] Theme parks are a key site for the establishment of corporate authorship. While Universal and Disney's parks remain the most prominent studio-related parks, numerous studios are reentering the theme park market after abandoning it several decades ago. Sony, Warner Brothers, Fox, and even independent Lionsgate have all recently opened or are preparing to open major theme parks outside the United States. Paramount was engaged in a similar project, but planning for this new park seems to have collapsed, leaving that company as the only major American media conglomerate without an associated theme park.

In the wake of the success of Universal's Wizarding World of Harry Potter, the studio theme parks associated with Disney and Universal have abandoned their former thematic approach, that of allowing guests to go behind the scenes of a "working" movie studio, and shifted towards the development of a collection of intensely immersive areas which allow guests to enter proprietary storyworlds which advance a franchise's transmedia storylines. This approach to theme park development is spreading beyond the explicitly studio-related parks and is now the dominant paradigm in all theme park development, as indicated by Disney's addition of the Avatar-themed Pandora to their Animal Kingdom and Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge to Disneyland.

Corporate ownership is particularly prominent in the text and paratext of films based on Marvel comic superheroes. Because the licenses to Marvel's primary IPs are scattered among several studios, fans are keenly aware that corporate ownership plays a large part in shaping the narrative structures of these various filmic Marvel storyworlds. In the comics, for instance, X-Men Wolverine and Beast are regular members of The Avengers. In the film versions of these same comics, these characters are excluded from the Avengers Storyworld due to reasons of corporate ownership – Fox controls the X-Men and Disney controls The Avengers.

Nowhere is this intertwining of corporate ownership and text and paratext more evident than in the case of Spider-Man. After releasing five films featuring various iterations of the character, Sony became concerned when *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) underperformed expectations. In 2015, the studio reached an agreement with Disney whereby Marvel Studios would produce films featuring Spider-Man while Sony covered all development, marketing, and distribution costs and retained the license to the character.[908] In exchange, Spider-Man would become part of the Disney-owned MCU and MCU characters like Iron-Man would appear in standalone Spider-Man features. The partnership manifested itself with a nod and a wink in 2016's *Captain America: Civil War*. As Tony Stark assembles a team to battle the renegade Captain America, he mentions that he knows a guy who might serve as a secret weapon. The scene then smash cuts to an establishing shot of Queens, with the borough's name splashed

The new generation of studio-related parks will be designed and built in this same vein, each land presenting a different corporately-controlled storyworld. As such, theme parks now serve as a physical manifestation of a media conglomerate's collection of intellectual properties, indelibly linking each featured narrative universe to the studio name above the marquee.

It should be noted that the relationship between corporate ownership of a storyworld and its presence in a studio park is not always one-to-one, as studio parks may license properties from other media corporations for use in their park. Universal Studios was particularly prone to this practice – Harry Potter, the keystone of all of Universal's studio parks, is a Warner Brothers franchise. This practice is quickly dying, however, as the studios increasingly view theme parks as integral components of both transmedia storyworlds and their corporate identity.

[908] Mansoor Mithalwala, Why Disney Let Marvel Make Spider-Man For Sony, *Screenrant*, 30 June 2017, https://screenrant.com/spider-man-disney-marvel-sony-toys-details/

in giant letters across the screen. Comic fans will know Queens as the familiar home of Spider-Man, and the sequence plays as a cheeky fanfare to his first appearance. The title of the first Marvel-produced Spider-Man film is an even broader reference to the property's role as a corporately held IP. The title *Spider-Man: Homecoming* has little relevance to the plot or themes of the film. The name makes sense only as a reference to the fact that Marvel's most famous character had ended his long sojourn among other studios and returned to his rightful place in the MCU. Corporate ownership – and authorship – has been inscribed in the very title of the film.

Scholar Jerome Christensen has proposed a theory of authorship in which the corporation itself is the author of major studio films. As Christensen explains, "Hollywood films are corporate speech,"[909] and are authored to advance the specific needs of the corporation. Christensen argues, for instance, that 1989's *Batman* was "an instrumental allegory contrived to accomplish corporate objectives."[910] In this case, that objective was to convince Time Inc. to merge with Warner Communications Inc. The model of corporate studio as author offers a particularly compelling way to understand *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. In the film, a young, inexperienced Peter Parker's desperate attempts to impress Tony Stark and gain membership in the Avengers mirrors Sony's own efforts to link their struggling Spider-Man franchise to the wildly successful MCU. Ultimately, Spider-Man impresses Stark but chooses to remain independent for the time being. The character's decision can be read as Sony's reminder that, though Spider-Man will be integrated into the MCU, Sony retains the license to the character and will develop spin-off franchises without Disney's input. The character of the Vulture, the villain of the piece, is particularly laden with meaning in this interpretation. The antagonist is portrayed by Michael Keaton, who had previously played flying-animal based superheroes in *Batman*, *Batman Returns* and *Birdman* (2014). Spider-Man's defeat of the Vulture is thus a symbolic victory for Sony and Disney over both rival Warner Brothers'

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[909] Jerome Christensen, <u>America's Corporate Art</u>, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2011) pg 284

[910] Christensen 281

DC-comic-based franchises and over *Birdman,* a film which was widely read by critics and industry insiders as a condemnation of superhero cinema.

One striking representation of the disintegration of traditional sources of authorship and the increasing visibility of corporate IP holders that has taken place in the shift to comic book poetics can be found in the significance of narrative gaps and excesses. In auteur theory, such breaks in the invisibility of editing, mise-en-scene, and cinematography are where we can look to find the personality and individual passions of the directorial genius. As explained in *Cahiers du Cinema*'s classic auteurist study of *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), what the auteur theorists attempted was "a re-scansion of these films in a process of active reading… to make them say what they have to say *within* what they leave unsaid, to reveal their constituent lacks." Since the films under study "are the work of extremely skilled filmmakers" and such omissions could not be mistakes or lies, "they are *structuring absences*, always displaced – an over overdetermination which is the only possible basis from which these discourses could be realized, the unsaid included in the said and necessary to its constitution." The *Cahiers* writers search for "what is already there, but silent… what this says, but what it doesn't say because it doesn't want to say it." The absence of actual politics from the tale of the young *Mr. Lincoln*, for instance, "is too useful to the film's ideological purpose to be fortuitous." It is, instead, director John Ford's attempt to indicate the mythic dimensions of Lincoln's character by trivializing politics, and in the process depict Lincoln's actual politics, those of American capitalism, as natural and even spiritual. [911] The authorial director resides in the gaps.

In modern comic-book filmmaking, similar gaps and excesses mean something very different. No longer can we find the director in the gaps – in 21st century blockbuster filmmaking, the storyworld, and by implication the corporate author, occupy those moments. We may take as an example *Thor*.

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[911] "A Collective Text By the Editors of Cahiers Du Cinema, John Ford's Young Mr. Lincoln," *Screen* Vol. 13 Iss. 3, October 1972

Several moments in the film deviate from the language of classical Hollywood storytelling. In one sequence, a mysterious archer is summoned by the government agency S.H.I.E.L.D. to deal with the Norse god rampaging through their property. The character is clearly signified as important – after the agent in charge, Coulson, dramatically calls for "someone up high. With a gun," we are treated to a series of quickly cut shots featuring a character choosing a weapon and running to a crane to assume an elevated view of the facility. Throughout the sequence, the editing and cinematography conspire to keep the man's face obscured. The sequence is accompanied by bombastically heroic music. After Coulson mentions the figure's name, "Barton," the film cuts to a zoom towards the figure in the high perch, finally revealed as Jeremy Renner. Ultimately, Barton, known to comic fans as the hero Hawkeye, makes absolutely no impact on the story's plot, not firing a single shot and disappearing from the film entirely a little over two minutes after he is introduced. His presence and the dramatic build-up it receives is included only to announce to the audience that the character exists in the MCU, to remind them of the film's role as a component of that universe, and to tease his presence in the upcoming Avengers.

In another sequence in the same film, the camera tracks with the villain Loki as he walks through the treasure room of Asgard. The shot follows the character in profile as he slowly passes a number of mounted objects, highlighted by individual spotlights and framed by the walls of their cubby holes in a manner signaling their importance. The objects are artifacts from the comic world – the Eye of Agamatto, the Infinity Gauntlet – which play significant roles in Marvel storylines and, for the knowledgeable fan, invoke the vast web of continuity that encircles any single entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Each object holds the promise of filmed versions of specific, beloved comic stories. In both of the above cases taken from Thor, the ostentatious interruptions call to mind not the personal predilections and concerns of director Kenneth Branagh but the film's role as a portion of a larger, corporately controlled storyworld. The corporate IP holder resides in the gaps.

Finding the Author Figure

In his landmark lecture "What Is an Author?," Michel Foucault longs for a world in which the author has been consigned to the trash heap of history, where the question "who is speaking?" has been replaced by the freeing inquiry, "what difference does it make who is speaking?" Foucault's author is a tyrant: "the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recompostion of fiction." Foucault posits an alternative reality, one he admits might be hopelessly romantic; "a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state, in which fiction would be put at the disposal of everyone and would develop without passing through something like a necessary or constraining figure."[912]

Foucault's dream would be a nightmare for modern film studios, whose fortunes rest largely on the continued control of endless fictional storyworlds. The culture industry is, not surprisingly, quite satisfied with what Foucault dubs "our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property," a set of circumstances with which the author myth is intimately entwined. Yet Hollywood's embrace of comic book poetics makes the presentation of an author figure difficult as it diminishes the creative control of directors, stars, and writers. As Suzzanne Scott explains, "transmedia stories disintegrate the author figure, as artists in different media collaboratively create the transmedia text."[913] This danger is attended by another. Comic book poetics excites a certain kind of fan behavior, one defined by an extreme loyalty to an IP, that studios crave. But as they develop this sense of loyalty,

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[912] Foucault

[913] Scott

as they integrate fictional universes into their own sense of self, fans also develop a sense of ownership. This is made evident by the rise of fan fiction, cosplay, fan art, and other manifestations of fannish behavior that looks very much like "the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recompostion of fiction" that takes place in Foucault's utopia.[914] The film and television industries are still wrestling with the degree to which such behavior, which have been common among comic book fans for decades, is a blessing or a curse. Some IP holders have attempted to turn such behavior to their benefit – at the 2012 Storyworld Conference, Kathy Franklin, Director of Franchising for Lightstorm Entertainment, explained the company's plans to use the outpouring of fan creativity that accompanied the release of the James Cameron studio's *Avatar* (2009) to flesh out and expand the universe. Franklin outlined one plan that would see fans invited to work in cooperation with Lightstorm personnel to create a Wikipedia-like database of the history, flora, fauna, and personalities of the fictional planet Pandora that could be drawn upon for future franchise installments. Other studios have been far less willing to indulge fan creativity. For an example of this, we may look at Paramount's running battle with the creators of Star Trek fan films. Regardless of how they approach fan behavior, whether they try to squelch it or turn it to their advantage, every corporate IP holder is desperate to maintain control over the use and meanings of their property.

Partially motivated by these threats to their IPs, Marvel and several other studios are experimenting with various ways to preserve what Foucault calls the author function even as traditional notions of authorship are destabilized. Such figures are tasked both with ensuring fans of a particularly franchise's fidelity to its source material, with providing a way for fans to understand deviations from that source material, and with defining the boundaries of the storyword franchise.

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[914] Foucault

The Universe Runner

One of the primary ways studios have attempted to fill the role of the author function is through the development of a new type of creative figure, the "universe runner," who takes on the public role of overseeing and guiding an entire storyworld franchise. I label this creator the "universe runner" in order to connect the role to the show runner, a key figure in the production of most fictional television programs. It should be noted that the "universe runner" usually has far less direct control then his television counterpart. Suzzanne Scott describes this figure as the "fanboy auteur," and her construction of the figure correctly highlights the fannish discourse that surrounds the role: "Fanboy auteurs are relatable because of their fan credentials, which are narrativized and (self) promoted as an integral part of their appeal as a trans-media interpreter for audiences." Scott argues that such figures are purely the construction of studios and other corporate IP holders seeking to replace an absent author figure.[915] Henry Jenkins replies that the "fanboy auteur" is as much a creation of fan interest as of corporate maneuvering.[916] My understanding of the figure falls somewhere in between these contrasting viewpoints. The "universe runner" is both a corporate and fan creation: the appointment of such a figure is a negotiation between fans and IP holder, albeit a negotiation defined by a very broad difference in power. Although the studio ultimately appoints the "runner," the success of the individual, particularly as it pertains to the vital public relations aspect of the position, is dependent on fan acceptance. Thus, James Gunn's elevation to "runner" of the galactic portion of the MCU was based both on box office (itself, to some degree, a signal of fan acceptance) and media discourse but also on fan acclaim. Similarly, a

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[915] Suzanne Scott, "Who's Steering the Mothership? The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling," The Participatory Culture Handbook, eds. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, (New York: Routledge, 2013)

[916] Henry Jenkins, "The Guiding Spirit and the Powers That Be: A Response to Suzanne Scott," The Participatory Culture Handbook, eds. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, (New York: Routledge, 2013)

"runner" may be rejected by fans, endangering the viability of the entire universe. Alex Kurtzman's central role in the planning of Universal's monster-centered Dark Universe was met with a fan reaction that could be described as equivocal at best, casting doubt on the entire project.

Whatever he's called (as Scott points out, the figure is almost always male), the universe-runner is the individual tasked with guiding the overall direction of a storyworld even though he does not necessarily write, direct, or hold any other traditional creative role on each of the individual installments. The role is often nebulous and shifts from studio to studio and, often, from universe-runner to universe-runner. The runner may write all or part of an episode's script, direct an episode in whole or in part, recruit creative personnel, or fulfill a number of other creative functions. What remains consistent is the presentation of the universe-runner as acting to ensure the direction of the franchise and the tonal, thematic, and story continuity between entries. The role is always one concerned with public relations, offering a single public, artistic face linking together a franchise whose individual entries are each produced by an entirely different creative team. One of the universe-runner's functions is to build and maintain fan trust in the direction of the universe, and as such they tend to be prominent fan-creators who have produced works which have been widely praised by fan communities. In this and in the runner's array of occasional creative functions, the role is strikingly similar to that played by Lee at Marvel from the late '60s to the early '80s. Once again, the shift in American film towards a serialized, open poetics has brought about the adoption of creative formations familiar to industries that have traditionally produced similar works.

From roughly 2011 to 2015, Marvel Studio's runner was Joss Whedon, who became something of a prototype for the position. Whedon's resume was perfectly suited in the role; he had been a script doctor on several blockbuster films before serving as showrunner on several heavily serialized, superhuman-focused television programs, most notably *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). *Buffy*, like Whedon's later program *Firefly* (2002-2003), had developed a devoted fan following, and a well-regarded run on Marvel's *X-Men* had proven his comic book credentials beyond a shadow of a doubt. In

addition to writing and directing *Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, films which featured all of the Marvel heroes leaving their individually-focused features and joining together, Whedon also assisted in the development of the MCU's first live-action television series, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Whedon also returned to his former role as script doctor and revised the screenplay for *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Discussing his work on the first Captain America feature, Whedon explained, "I just got to make some character connections. The structure of the thing was really tight and I loved it, but there were a couple of opportunities to find his voice a little bit — and some of the other characters — and make the connections so that you understood exactly why he wanted to be who he wanted to be."[917] Beyond these more concrete roles, in August 2012 Whedon was also retained on an exclusive contract to, as an official press release phrased it, "contribute creatively to the next phase of Marvel's cinematic universe."[918]

After signing the 2012 contract, Whedon referred to himself as "[Marvel's] sort of consigliere for a while," elaborating that "I sort of had my finger in all of the films in the second phase."[919] Whedon described his role as one in which he "put your little fairy dust on things and just improve them slightly."[920] Unlike the screenwriters assigned to Marvel's individual projects, the universe runner exerted real control over the course of the production – "they actually listen to you," marvels Whedon.[921] Many critics saw the Marvel's quippy tone, reminiscent of the writer/director's work on television's Buffy the Vampire Slayer, as a product of Whedon's constant involvement.[922] As such, Whedon fulfilled

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[917] Ed Gross, "Joss Whedon Discusses His Contributions to The First Avenger: Captain America," *Earth's Mightiest*, 17 Aug. 2010, http://www.earthsmightiest.com/fansites/captainamerica/news/?a=7535

[918] Vary

[919] Angie Han, Joss Whedon is Really and Truly Done with the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Slash Film*, 4 Jan. 2016, http://www.slashfilm.com/joss-whedon-marvel-cinematic-universe/

[920] Han

[921] Han

[922] Kelley

one of the primary purposes of the author function, offering fans a way to understand creative aspects of franchise installments even when he played no clear role in their production.

Whedon also occasionally directed portions of other Marvel directors' films, particularly the increasingly familiar post-credit sequences that play a pivotal role in linking Marvel's films together. In *Thor*, Whedon directed a segment that sees the malevolent Loki, disguised as the benign Dr. Solving, enter a S.H.I.E.L.D facility and express interest in a powerful artifact, hinting at the plotline of *Avengers*. Similarly, Whedon directed a sequence for *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* that sees two evil scientists musing over Loki's staff and two captive young superhumans who will prove pivotal in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.[923] Marvel Studios happily publicized Whedon's involvement in these films, strengthening fan perceptions of him as the organizing intelligence of the entire MCU.

Despite his unique position as ostensible overseer of the Marvel universe, Whedon was still subject to the pitfalls of collaborative creativity; he clashed repeatedly with Marvel executives during the editing of 2015's *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and was ultimately forced to include scenes he would have preferred to have left on the cutting room floor. As Whedon explained, the editing of the second Avengers film left him feeling every day like "I didn't do enough, I didn't do enough, I didn't do enough. I wasn't ready. Here's failure. Here's failure. Here's compromise. Here's compromise."[924] Partially motivated by this experience, Whedon severed his relationship with Marvel to pursue other opportunities. Within two years, he had been drafted into a similar role for DC's comic films, developing a Batgirl film and taking over directing duties on 2017's *Justice League* from Zach Snyder, who was forced to leave the project due to a family tragedy.

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[923] Kase Wickman, "Joss Whedon Directed Part of 'Captain America: The Winter Soldier,'" *MTV News*, 13 March 2014, http://www.mtv.com/news/1724057/joss-whedon-directed-part-of-captain-america-the-winter-soldier/

[924] Vary

Whedon's "universe runner" role has served as a model for the creation of organizing author figures, and similar positions have appeared at many other studios attempting to shepherd a storyworld franchise through production. DC's attempt to ape Marvel's success was initially entrusted to Christopher Nolan, whose Dark Knight series had earned the company a degree of critical acclaim that was almost unprecedented for comic films. Though the Dark Knight series existed in its own storyworld, Warner Brothers enlisted Nolan to oversee the early stages of the DCEU in an attempt to carry the Batman franchise's prestige to a new series of films. Nolan stepped down from this role following the release of the first DCEU film, *Man of Steel* (2013), and was replaced by director Zach Snyder. Whedon himself was replaced in the MCU by James Gunn, tasked with overseeing and expanding the galactic side of Marvel's empire, and Joe and Anthony Russo, handed responsibility for all other aspects of the constantly growing universe.

<u>Stan Lee as Author Figure</u>

Despite the advantages they offer studios, universe runners are still transient, likely to move on to other projects after several years. Only Marvel has Stan Lee, a figure uniquely suited to fill the author function. Lee has achieved almost mythical status among comic fans, has become a synecdoche for the company as a whole, and is, after the 2005 settlement, unlikely to contradict or challenge the studio's control of its valuable IPs. Through public and media appearances and, particularly, as a constant and unique presence in Marvel-based films, Marvel has positioned Lee as the ultimate author figure of its sprawling storyverse. His warm, grandfatherly presence is perfectly suited to offset the perception of Marvel Studios as a cold, corporately-controlled production line churning out individual slices of processed pop culture.

Other creative figures have played similar roles for other franchises, but none was better suited to the role then Lee. Henry Jenkins has explored the idea of Gene Roddenberry, creator of Star Trek, as a Foucault-ian author figure, and Roddenberry may offer the closest analog to Lee.[925] Lee, however, surpasses even Roddenberry in his usefulness as a unifying and authenticating author function – Lee is much more prominent, known beyond the relatively small circle of fans familiar with Rodenberry, and unlike Rodenberry is a physical presence in numerous transmedia iterations of the Marvel storyworlds, blurring the line between creator and character. Most importantly, Lee has spent decades mythologizing himself and asserting his own authorial role.

Lee's actual creative input into Marvel's 21st century comic based features has been minimal. Asked about his role as executive producer of *X-Men* and *Spider-Man*, the turn-of-the-century Marvel films that began the comic-book cinema wave, Lee admitted his involvement was "Not really that much. In the Spider-Man movie, my big thing is, I have a walk-on."[926] Lee has little control even over his own appearances in Marvel's films: "When I go onto the set, I never know what they're going to ask me to do. I never know in advance, so it's always a surprise and it's always fun."[927] Still, these cameo appearances mattered a great deal to him, a sentiment he expressed in an interview regarding the first Spider-Man film: "The only fear I have… Sam Raimi, the director, sort of came up with the idea to oblige me, to get me into the movie, so it's sort of peripheral to the main plot. If the movie runs too long, they could easily drop it. So I'm hoping the movie doesn't run too long."[928]

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[925] Henry Jenkins, "Genre and Authorship in *Star Trek*," <u>Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek</u>, eds. Henry Jenkins and John Tulloch, (London: Routledge, 1995) pg. 175

[926] Robinson

[927] Daniel Fienberg, "Interview: Stan Lee on His 'Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.' Cameo and his Hopes for the ABC Drama," *Hitfix*, 4 Feb. 2014, http://uproxx.com/hitfix/interview-stan-lee-on-his-agents-of-shield-cameo-and-his-hopes-for-the-abc-drama/

[928] Robinson

Lee needn't have worried, for even as the former editor's creative significance in Marvel's filmmaking efforts has diminished, his symbolic significance has increased dramatically. Lee should not be viewed merely as a puppet manipulated by the behemoth of Marvel Studios. The years he had spent establishing his authorial voice were integral to his usefulness to Marvel. Foucault makes clear that the author-function and the actual creator need not be one and the same: "[the author-function] does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects – positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals." As in the case of Hippocrates, Foucault contends, a single figure may perform the author function for works originally created by numerous individuals. Much of the discord surrounding Lee over the years has come because of the division between Lee's role as author function and the collaborative reality of comic creation. In the '60s, the media began positioning Lee as Marvel's author figure, a stand-in for the large groups of creators actually involved in the authorial process. In the '70s and '80s, Marvel itself heavily promoted Lee in this role. From 1972, when Lee stepped down as editor-in-chief, to well into the 2000s, almost every story published by Marvel was prefaced with the words, "Stan Lee presents." Given an opportunity to fully explore his ideas of authorship via his collaboration with Resnais, Lee transposed many of the traits associated with the romantic genius – his isolation, his art as an expression of his unique subjectivity – onto the management figure of the producer.

Though there is no reason to believe Lee was familiar with Foucault, the former editor has sometimes voiced an understanding of authorship that seemed to echo Foucault's notion of the author function. In the early '60s, even as he developed the expansive Marvel Universe, Lee produced an outline for a television series based on cartoonist Russell Patterson's comic strip character Mamie. The program would have joined other successful recent programs based on newspaper comics that included *Blondie* (1957), *Dennis the Menace* (1959-1963) and *Hazel* (1961-1966). Lee proposed making creator and artist Russell Patterson a major character within the world of the show, arguing that Patterson's presence would serve as one of the program's primary marketing hooks, ensuring advertisers of its authenticity: "A good

selling point for the Mamie show would be to tie in the value of the name Russell Patterson with the sponsor's product. I would propose using Russell to sell the product…" Lee further contended that inserting Patterson into the plot would help to "bridge the gap between the comic strip Mamie and the television Mamie without mixing the two up." [929] The Marvel editor is describing something akin to a transmedia application of the organizing and authorizing role of the author function as described by Foucault. Throughout his career, Lee positioned himself as he had proposed to position Patterson, as a transmedia author figure. The very first adaptation of Marvel's heroes into another medium, 1966's Grantray-Lawrence produced *Marvel Super Heroes*, was sold to syndicators largely on the strength of footage of Lee hosting the program, explaining the concept to prospective audience members.[930] In the '70s, the avuncular editor would serve as the narrator for the *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* Saturday morning cartoon. When Marvel packaged several cartoons together in 1995 to form the syndicated *Marvel Action Hour*, Lee was on hand to introduce the segments. As Marvel's properties began reaching film screens with regularity in the years after 2002, Lee would enjoy a new career as a constant cameo presence.

Lee's physical presence was also key to several of the unrealized projects he pitched to producers. In the 1980s Lee met with producers to propose a television movie, *Shockers*, conceived as a compilation of four fantasy-tinged stories with an "O. Henry-type of surprise ending." To structure the collection, Lee suggested that the program "tie the four together with a single thread, linked by a narrator such as Stan Lee, the creator of SPIDER-MAN and THE INCREDIBLE HULK, in the way Alfred Hitchcock narrated his show, and the way Rod Serling narrated TWILIGHT ZONE," invoking another pair of creators who inserted themselves into their own pictures.

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[929] Stan Lee, Mamie proposal, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

[930] McGovern pg. 46

As he worked to bring Marvel properties to other media, Lee frequently presented himself explicitly in the role of the authorizer, guaranteeing that Marvel adaptations follow the original model closely and display a certain level of quality. In a 1981 edition of Stan's Soapbox, he responded to fan's dissatisfaction with a recent TV series by proclaiming, "Remember, as long as I'm manning the lonely Marvel outpost here in sunny California, I'll be making sure that our artwork and our stories are as much in the Marvel style as we can possibly make them, as well as the directing, the music, the coloring, and the editing."[931] Such declarations were fairly common in the Soapbox, which Lee very often used to promote new Marvel adaptations, a vast number of which never materialized. Lee also used the space to frame such adaptations in a manner appealing to the comic book audience and guarantee their quality. In such statements, Lee once again positioned his editorial role as the key authorial one, enveloping the creative contributions of all his collaborators.

The Omnipresent Mr. Lee

Stan Lee's freuent cameos in media based on Marvel properties are integral to his role as Marvel's mythological author. Outside of Lee, creator cameos in films based on Marvel properties are relatively rare. *Thor* features a scene in which J. Michael Straczynski, author of a recent and well-regarded run on the Thor comics, attempts to lift the title character's hammer, while Ed Brubaker, who wrote the storyline that inspired the film, appears as a scientist in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. In films produced by Fox and based on Marvel properties, Chris Claremont, whose decade-long run on *The X-Men* turned the moribund property into Marvel's most successful franchise, makes a brief appearance in the third X-Men film while Rob Liefeld, Deadpool's creator, appears for a moment in the

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[931] Stan's Soapbox, 1981, Stan Lee Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

first film based on the character. Other major Marvel creators, such as Roy Thomas, who co-created the second Avengers film's villain Ultron, and Spider-Man co-creator Steve Ditko, are notable by their continual absence. Cameos from creators beside Lee are not only rare but discreet. Claremont, Straczynski, Liefeld, and Brubaker are unrecognizable to all but the most devoted comic fan, and the films in which they appear make little effort to signify their importance. The creators are hidden in the corner of shots or slip into unremarkable minor roles in the film. Lee's cameos, on the other hand, are usually marked by the film's editing, cinematography, script, and/or mise en scene as significant, breaks within the flow of the picture that signal his importance. These cameos play upon the audience's familiarity with Lee for comedic purposes; *Deadpool* even cheekily refers to Lee's appearance in the opening credits, promising audiences "A Gratuitous Cameo."

Lee's appearance in films based on Marvel's properties can usefully be understood in terms of Tom Gunning's theory of the cinema of attractions. Gunning argues that critical focus on narrative cinema has obscured the fact that, until 1906 or 1907, a different mode of filmmaking dominated the nascent movie industry. This mode was exhibitionist rather than voyeuristic, emphasizing cinema's ability to show things to the audience – beautiful landscapes, uproarious sight gags, erotic images, etc. – instead of telling a story. This is a cinema that engages the audience directly, suspending the conceit of the fourth wall to acknowledge the presence of a viewing public. One of the key elements which defines the cinema of attractions is "the recurring look at the camera by actors." This is a cinema that is, "willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of spectators."[932] While this mode of filmmaking was quickly eclipsed by the conventions of narrative cinema, elements of it continued to endure in a variety of genres. Musicals and action films both serve as an example, with the narrative of the film halting in favor of a spectacle, either a dance routine or fight sequence, aimed

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[932] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* Vol. 8 Iss. 3, 1986

directly at the audience. Comic book cinema offers an even purer example of this phenomenon, as moments like Hawkeye's introduction or Loki's walk through the treasure room break the narrative flow of a film's story to directly address fans, engaging their knowledge of the complex history of comic continuity. Lee's appearances are an even more direct invocation of the cinema of attractions, as the film's narrative briefly evaporates and the entire audience engages in a collective in-joke. Lee's cameos are a wink to the audience every bit as broad as those given by slapstick comedians prior to 1906.

The authorizing and classificatory function of Lee's appearances are particularly important for Marvel, whose transmedia storyverse stretches across almost every imaginable form of media. The former editor appears in the first seasons of the MCU TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Agent Carter* (2015-2016), *Daredevil* (2015-present), *Jessica Jones* (2015-present), *Luke Cage* (2016-present), and *Iron Fist* (2017-present). He narrates the video games *Spider-Man* (2000), *Spider-Man 2: Enter Electro* (2001), and *Spider-Man Shattered Dimensions* (2010) and appears as a character in *Marvel Super Hero Squad* (2009), *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014), *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* (2006), and *Marvel Heroes* (2016). An animated Lee appears in TV cartoons including *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2012-2017), *Hulk and the Agents of S.M.A.S.H.* (2013-2015), *The Super Hero Squad Show* (2009-2011), and *The Spectacular Spider-Man* (2008-2009). Perhaps most surprisingly, Lee makes appearances in rides featured in both Disney and Universal theme parks. In Disney's California Adventure's *Guardians of the Galaxy: Mission Breakout*, Lee joins the Guardians themselves as prisoner of the avaricious Collector. At Universal's Islands of Adventure's *Adventures of Spider-Man*, several Lee cameos were added to the ride in a 2012 makeover. In his most prominent role in the attraction, a CGI Lee appears as a confused old man who nearly crashes a truck into guests.

As we have discussed, historical circumstances have ensured that the licenses for Marvel's IPs are scattered among four different studios. This fact makes Lee's role as the author-function even more vital. Lee's appearance or absence in each Marvel adaptation is a way for studios to define the degree to which their films should be understood as embodying the colorful, flippant superheroics that define

Marvel properties. Films in which Lee didn't cameo tend to be those that sought to intentionally distance themselves from the Marvel brand, to place themselves beyond the boundaries of the franchise. The decision to exclude Lee is often based on a desire to appeal to a more mature audience then is targeted by the typically family-friendly Marvel franchise. Lee is thus absent from films such as *Ghost Rider* (2007), *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* (2011), *Punisher*, *Punisher: War Zone* (2008), and *Logan* (2017). In the Netflix Marvel series, Lee's appearances are so subdued as to be almost non-existent. The same photograph of the former editor dressed as a police officer appears in each series, hidden on a placard or poster placed in the background of important scenes. Lee's easily-missed presence in these series illustrates the careful balancing act the programs are attempting to perform, offering a gritty, street-level depiction of superheroics that conforms to the tropes of "peak TV" while maintaining a definite, if loose, connection to the family-oriented films of the MCU.

In other cases, as with Fox's *Elektra* and *The Fantastic Four* (2015), Lee's absence is indicative of Marvel's dissatisfaction with the product or the studio producing it and the company's desire to define the film as beyond the boundaries of the Marvel oeuvre. This dissatisfaction frequently stems from the liberties the producers are taking with the source material; in the case of 2015's *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel owner Ike Perlmutter's disgust at Fox's approach to Marvel's "first family" was so profound that in 2015 he ordered the publishing division to cease producing the comic lest it inadvertently promote the film; it was the first time Marvel did not release a monthly Fantastic Four comic since 1961.[933] Perlmutter also reduced use of the Fantastic Four characters in other comics and minimized their appearance on merchandise, all in an effort to deprive Fox the benefit of free publicity.[934] Lee's absence

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[933] Rich Johnston, "CONFIRMED: Fantastic Four to be Cancelled in 2015 With a Triple-Sized Issue 645, For Fantastic Fourever," *Bleeding Cool*, 5 Oct. 2014, https://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/10/05/confirmed-fantastic-four-to-be-cancelled-in-2015-with-a-triple-sized-issue-645-as-january-kicks-off-fantastic-fourever/

[934] Rich Johnston, "Marvel Even Removed X-Men From Marvel Calendar Speech Balloons," *Bleeding Cool*, 11 May 2016, https://www.bleedingcool.com/2016/05/11/marvel-even-removed-x-men-from-marvel-calendar-speech-balloons/

from these films serves to place them beyond the pale, marking them as fundamentally unauthorized despite the studio's legal claims to the IP.

A brief examination of several of Lee's cameos can help us understand how they position him as the universe's mythical author. Lee's earliest cameos, such as those in *X-Men*, *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), and *Spider-Man*, tended to depict Lee staring in ironic amazement at the characters. Lee's appearance in Daredevil is typical of these appearances; the comic creator strolls down the street, lost in a newspaper, when the young, recently-blinded Matt Murdoch uses his radar-sense to stop him from stepping in front of a truck. Blocked by Murdoch's cane, Lee drops his paper, revealing his face to the audience for the first time, and performs a broad double-take, first towards the passing bus and then towards the future Daredevil. His faux-shock at the extraordinary abilities of the characters he helped create serves as a joke, eliciting a giggle from viewers while reminding them of his intimate, authorial connection with the superheroes by momentarily denying it. A related series of cameos comically accentuates Lee's relationship to the characters he helped create by showing him unable to recognize or unwilling to believe in one of Marvel's heroes. In *Captain America: Civil War*, Lee appears as a FedEx employee making a delivery to Avengers HQ. Tapping on the glass door to gain the attention of Iron Man and War Machine, a befuddled Lee squints at the label on the package in his hands and queries, "Are you Tony… St… Stank?" An amused War Machine points at Tony Stark, chuckling, "Yes, this is Tony Stank." Lee makes similar appearances in *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *The Avengers*. A variation on this style of cameo draws attention to Lee's identity by having characters misidentify or fail to recognize him. In *Iron Man*, Tony Stark identifies Lee as Hugh Hefner, while in its sequel Stark refers to him as Larry King.

Other cameos associate Lee even more closely with the characters he helped create during his time as Marvel's chief writer. Fox's first Fantastic Four film is the only feature that allows Lee to play a character he helped create, placing him in the well-worn shoes of postman Willie Lumpkin, who moved from a short-lived newspaper strip to a long career delivering mail to the Fantastic Four. *Spider-Man 3*

(2007) placed Lee in something approximating his most familiar comic role, the omniscient, moralizing narrator. As Peter Parker gazes at a digital billboard announcing that Spider-Man will receive the key to the city after a recent heroic exploit, Lee sidles up to him and muses, "You know, I guess one person can make a difference," adding one of his most familiar catch phrases, 'Nuff said!" before ambling off. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* similarly uses one of Lee's catch phrases to remind viewers of his comic-based persona, as an inebriated Lee gargles "Excelsior!" as he is being carried out of a party in Avengers Tower.

Several of Lee's cameos highlight his role as author by depicting him reading or by otherwise visually associating him with books. *Daredevil* sees Lee immersed in a newspaper while *Doctor Strange* finds him chortling happily over Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, a book that might explain the psychedelic battle taking place just outside of his view. Similarly, in *Amazing Spider-Man* Lee appears as a librarian, whose headphones render him oblivious to the conflict that is hurling debris within inches of his head.[935]

Lee's function as a synecdoche for the Lee-Kirby creative team is made clear in his cameo in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Thor, trying to dissuade a military veteran played by Lee from drinking Asgardian ale, warns him that "it is not meant for mortal men." Lee replies, "Neither was Omaha Beach. Stop trying to scare us, Blondie." Comic fans would be aware that Lee himself spent the war stationed in Astoria, Queens, writing and illustrating training manuals and designing posters warning soldiers of the dangers of VD. Far from storming Omaha Beach, Lee was able to keep producing comic scripts throughout the war, though he had to cede his editorial duties for the duration.[936] It was, in fact, Jack Kirby who landed on Omaha Beach, albeit not in the first wave of invaders, during a distinguished stint in the military during World War II.

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[935] A final subset of cameos, featured in films including Iron Man 3, Guardians of the Galaxy, Ant-Man, and Deadpool, cast the iconic editor as a typical "dirty old man."

[936] Raphael and Spurgeon, pg 32

Lee's appearance in the second Fantastic Four film similarly positions a solo Lee as a stand-in for the Lee-Kirby creative team. The sequence is Lee's only appearance based directly on a scene in a comic he played a role in creating. In the film, Lee arrives at the wedding of Reed Richards and Sue Storm, but is stopped at the entrance by a bouncer; "Uh, invitation, sir." Lee gestures at the guest list, claiming, "I should be on that list." "name?" "Stan Lee!" The bouncer begins to push Lee out of line. "Yeah, nice try, buddy." "No, no, really, I'm Stan Lee." In addition to being another iteration of the "comical misidentification" scene that makes up so many of Lee's cameos, the scene is a replay of one from 1965's *Fantastic Four Annual* #3, which saw Lee and Jack Kirby refused admission to the landmark wedding of the two superheroes. In the original sequence, a frustrated Kirby tells the bouncer, "You haven't heard the LAST of this! We have ways of getting EVEN!"[937] This remark highlights the pair's metafictional role as the current architects of the fictional universe in which they are appearing, able to determine the future events that affect its characters. The film's Lee makes no such declaration, an acknowledgement of his shift from active creator to symbolic author. The key difference between the two sequences is the absence of Jack Kirby.

In his analysis of Lee's Marvel cameos, Dru Jeffries points out that, "Overwhelmingly, Lee is represented in his cameos as a blue-collar or working-class individual." In such appearances, Lee plays the role of a hot dog vendor (X-Men), security guard (Hulk, Captain America: Winter Soldier), and mailman (Fantastic Four). Outside of the filmic MCU, Lee also appears as a garbage truck driver in Universal Florida's Adventures of Spider-Man theme park attraction. Jeffries argues that these working-class cameos "present ironic inversions of Lee's status as creative genius (in the eyes of some viewers), or, at the very least, implicit affirmations that his creative days are behind him."[938] I would argue instead that these cameos work to associate him more closely with the day-to-day creation of comics, which in

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[937] Stan Lee, "Bedlam at the Baxter Building!" *Fantastic Four Annual 3*, Marvel Comics 1965

[938] Jeffries

the pre-70s comic industry, as Jeffries correctly points out, was often portrayed in media and industry narratives as a blue-collar endeavor. Lee himself would often present the act of writing as physical labor, complaining in the Marvel paratext of the physical pain and mental drudgery of constant work at the typewriter. In this way, these appearances obscure Lee's other role, that of editor and thus a member of corporate management. Once more, Lee effaces his editorial power in order to emphasize his work as a prolific writer.

It should be noted that these blue-collar cameos also work, like the *Avengers: Age of Ultron* appearance which sees a drunken Lee discuss his experiences on D-Day, to elide the figure of Lee with the absent one of Jack Kirby. As discussed in the first chapter, media representations of the two men sometimes contrasted their appearance and demeanor in class terms, depicting Kirby as the working-class drudge in contrast to the bubbly white-collar Lee. During his college tours, Lee adopted a persona which moved him further from the working-class connotations of the early comics, with hip, fashionable clothing, sunglasses, and jewelry. Kirby, meanwhile, maintained his more blue-collar persona, which gained wide circulation with the emergence of the fan community and their interest in the "King of Comics." In the '80s, Kirby would invite fans into his California home and let them watch him, still dressed as "the foreman in a cigar factory," as he engaged in the actual physical labor of comic creation. By assuming a working-class persona, Lee emphasizes his role not simply as a romantic author but as a synecdoche for the collaborative Marvel creative process.

Since 1961, a combination of Lee's own rhetoric, PR efforts by Marvel, and discussions within the fan community have inflated Lee's actual, integral creative role in the creation of the Marvel universe to one which is divorced from historical fact, encompassing and obscuring the many participants in Marvel's industrial production practice. The degree to which Lee's role as the author function has become detached from actual history is attested to by his appearance in films featuring characters he had absolutely no part in creating. Though Lee appeared in both Guardians film, his only actual contributions to the material on which those pictures are based is the co-creation of the antagonists Ronan the Accuser

and Ego the Living Planet, conceived as villains for The Fantastic Four and Thor, respectively, and the tree-creature Groot, who debuted during the period immediately preceding the Marvel Revolution, when Lee and Kirby were churning out an endless series of "giant monster" comics. Groot thus pre-dated the Marvel Universe, and was forgotten until other creators integrated him into the main superhero storyverse in 1976. The other members of the team were created by an array of artists and writers over the course of the '70s and were repurposed as a team by writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning in 2008. In fact, when Lee was asked early in 2014, less than eight months before its release, if he would be appearing in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, he replied, "No, I'm afraid not…. That's the one group I didn't create. I didn't write Guardians of the Galaxy. I'm not even sure who they all are."[939] *Deadpool*, the 2016 hit, offers an even more extreme example of the degree to which Lee's author function is separated from historical reality. The film features Lee as an avuncular strip club DJ despite the fact that Deadpool was created, largely by Rob Liefeld and Fabian Nicieza, in 1991, a decade after Lee had given up any interest in the direction of Marvel's creative endeavors and had moved to Hollywood. Lee even appears as an animated version of himself in Disney's 2014 *Big Hero 6*, a film with only the slightest connection to any comic Marvel ever published, and none whatsoever with any to which Lee himself contributed.

Thus, despite his minimal actual role in the creation of the comic on which the film is based, Lee appears in *Guardians of the Galaxy 2*, perched on a rock in the depths of outer space, telling stories to a band of extraterrestrial audience surrogates. It has taken over 50 years of negotiation between the comic industry, television producers, and film studios to bring that moment – and the Marvel universe as a whole – to the big-screen. During that same period, Lee has worked, with the frequent cooperation of Marvel's promotional apparatus, to position himself as the dominant author of that universe, obscuring the industrial, collaborative apparatus that produced Marvel's comics and which has begun to reshape the

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[939] Peter Sciaretta, "Find Out Why Stan Lee Won't Have a Cameo in Marvel's 'Guardians of the Galaxy,'" *Slash Film*, 22 Jan 2014

way Hollywood makes movies. Lee is more than happy to live out his days fulfilling the author function for one of pop culture's most successful franchises. Addressing a comic convention audience in 2016, he revealed that he would soon be flying to Delaware to film three cameos for three Marvel features. The former editor grinned as he said, "Now, I don't know what the movies are. I don't know what the cameos are, but I know I'll damn well be there."[940]

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[940] Ryan Parker, "Stan Lee Jokes 'Deadpool' Cameo Made Him 'Damn Mad,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, 30 Apr. 2016

Conclusion

Shifting Universes

While the increasing prominence of comic book poetics has seen a resurgence in industrialized, collaborative filmmaking, there is no reason to think the ideal of the romantic author in film has been permanently vanquished. Even within the comic industry romantic and collaborative understandings of authorship are in a constant process of give and take, the balance between the two determined by a complex matrix of industrial, cultural, and economic forces. At certain moments, such as the early '90s, individual creators have seemed to drive the industry, while at others, such as the early 2000s, powerful editors, collaborative creativity, and a strong house style have dominated comic book production.

Beginning in the mid-80s, Marvel and DC began to develop new poetic techniques that allowed publishers to create both ostensibly creator-driven and character-driven works, often featuring the same sets of characters. These new narrative approaches also allowed the two major comic companies to better control the degree to which a particular storyverse was linked to an "auterist" creator, emphasizing or deemphasizing romantic authorship largely at will. This approach relied upon the proliferation of parallel universes or dimensions in each of the publishers' "multiverses."

DC took the lead in the development of this new cosmology, with hints of multiple dimensions appearing in the company's books as early as the '40s and '50s. The multiverse began to be codified in the early '60s as a result of the effort spearheaded by editor Julius Schwartz that saw the creation of new, reimagined versions of pre-war and wartime heroes. The Flash was the first of these reinvented heroes to appear, and in 1961 the story "The Flash of Two Worlds" saw the new Flash, Barry Allen, meet his predecessor, Jay Garrick. To do so, Allen had to cross to another universe, since Garrick existed only as a fictional character in Allen's native reality. In the following decades, such parallel universes proliferated

and rules governing their interaction were developed. Each new universe featured a different pantheon of heroes, either variations on DC's core heroes or entirely new casts of characters. Since the superhero revival that began with the debut of the new Flash, most of DC's stories have taken place on the world known as Earth-One. Earth-Zero is home to twisted, "Bizarro" versions of the DC pantheon, Earth-Two features the DC characters as they appeared before superheroes fell out of fashion in the post-war years, and Earth-Three is menaced by evil variations of Batman, Superman, and other familiar costumed crusaders.

The description above gives only the most fleeting glimpse of the baffling complexity of DC's multiverse. All told, DC's cosmos features well over two hundred defined parallel Earths, each in their own universe. These parallel worlds do not necessarily remain consistent, vanishing and appearing, compressing and expanding, all as required by DC's creative and marketing needs. DC's first mega-event, the storyline which began the craze for epic multi-issue crossovers that would dominate the comic industry from the late '80s until today, was 1985's *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which wiped many of these worlds from DC's continuity in an attempt to simplify the publisher's books for new readers. In the years that followed, DC would periodically publish new events specifically designed to simplify, complicate, or rearrange its multiverse as industrial and cultural forces demanded. Such events have included *Zero Hour* (1994), *Infinite Crisis* (2005), *Final Crisis* (2008), *Flashpoint* (2011), and *Convergence* (2015). As the above discussion suggests, DC's approach to the intricacies of its multiverse borders on the obsessive. Marvel, which also boasts a sprawling, numbered multiverse, is much more relaxed in its attitudes towards formalizing the relationship between its various universes, with new dimensions appearing, disappearing, or reappearing as creative teams require.

These parallel universes have also provided Marvel and DC with the means to balance and manage creator-driven and character-driven works. Popular creators with a unique style could be allowed to manage their own universe, creating new characters or developing established heroes in unique ways without disturbing the continuity of the editorially-driven primary narrative universe. DC and Marvel's

entire pantheon of heroes could be killed off, aged 50 years, or turned evil, all in the service of the unique story a particular creator wanted to tell. After the creator of a parallel universe storyline left that project, the publisher was free to let that universe lie dormant or to assign a new creative team to continue its narrative. The publisher was also free to integrate those characters into the company's primary universe, bringing the parallel universes characters into the publisher's industrialized production system.

The history of *Watchmen*, created by Alan Moore and David Gibbons for DC, can serve as an example of this phenomenon. The Watchmen, themselves thinly-vieled analogs of Charlton's cast of costumed heroes, were introduced in the comic of the same name in 1986. The series was a landmark in comic history, a serious, historically informed examination of vigilante justice and the various tropes of the superhero comics which received widespread praise and attention outside the comic community. At the end of the 12-issue mini-series the characters became dormant, with DC unwilling to let any other creative team disturb the work, widely held as an auteurist masterpiece, that had helped bring a degree of mainstream respectability to the comic industry. This changed in 2012, in part because it became clear that Moore would never return to tell more stories in the world he had created. DC released a series of prequel stories to the Watchmen series, each from a different creative team. In 2016, as part of DC's *Rebirth* event, DC began the process of integrating the Watchmen into the publisher's primary universe, telling the story of how Watchman Dr. Manhattan was able to bridge the divide between his own world and the one on which DC's main pantheon of heroes resides.

There is evidence that Hollywood is beginning to use a similar approach as a way to balance creator- and character-driven films featuring superhero IPs. In late 2017, Warner Bros. announced that it was developing a Joker origin film produced by Martin Scorsese and was attempting to sign superstar Leonardo DiCaprio for the lead role. This news came as a shock to many inside and outside the industry, as the studio had recently introduced a version of the Joker played by Jared Leto and had announced plans to feature him in several more films. That Joker debuted in *Suicide Squad* (2016) and was part of the same narrative universe as Warner Bros. other DCEU films including *Man of Steel* and *Batman vs.*

Superman: Dawn of Justice (2016). Reporters questioned Scorsese's involvement: "Why would the 74-year-old auteur filmmaker behind everything from Taxi Driver to Silence be interested in making the kind of studio franchise fare he has avoided throughout his career?" Warner Bros. wanted to "diversify the studio's contributions to the genre, creating the potential to make awards-worthy films," something that could only be done with prominent, individual creators like DiCaprio and Scorsese on board to legitimate a genre usually produced via an industrialized, collaborative process. To do this, the studio intended "to branch off with stand-alone movies that are unconnected to [the DCEU] version of the DC world," allowing these films to feature "non-traditional takes on the heroes and villains of DC." By creating a group of superhero-centered films outside the continuity dependent, producer driven main series, Warner Bros. hoped to "attract actors and filmmakers who don't typically toil in the comic-book movie world." [941] Warner Bros. was, in other words, exploring the full potential of comic book poetics, adopting a narrative technique comic editors had relied upon for years to entice work out of prominent creators wary of submitting to editorial oversight.

As the development of the Scorsese-produced Joker film implies, the film industry's use of comic book poetics and its attitudes towards franchise authorship are rapidly evolving. It remains to be seen how deeply and in what ways the unique narrative form seen in superhero comics will influence studios and filmmakers in the future. This study has been a preliminary attempt to understand the complex history of comic book authorship and its relationship with other culture industries, and there is still much research to be done. Though I have focused my attention on the film industry, superhero comics have had just as substantial an impact on the world of television; in 2017, costumed crusaders dominate the small screen as fully as the do the big. In *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (2013), Derek Johnson eloquently explores the relationship between comics and video

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[941] Kim Masters, "The Joker Movie: Warner Bros. Wants Class, Cachet and Maybe Leonardo DiCaprio," *Hollywood Reporter* 1 Nov. 2017

games, but there is still much more to discuss regarding the incredibly complicated interaction between two cultural forms that boast very different narrative systems. Further research is also necessary to understand how the rise of comic book poetics and the reemergence of industrialized production in the film industry will change wider American culture, altering the way we think about creativity, our history, and the world we want to live in.

In 1961, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko, ensconced at one of the less popular publishers in a marginalized medium, began to experiment with the superhero story, a genre widely understood to be past its prime. Those experiments have played a key role in making the comic book superhero one of the dominant figures in early 21st century American culture. The work of Lee and his collaborators has profoundly altered the kind of stories Hollywood tells, the way it tells them, and how audiences receive them. To fully understand American popular culture in 2017, we must understand the history of the superhero comic book.

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